The MISADVENTURES of THREE GOOD BOYS

HENRY · A · SHUTE

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By Henry A. Shute

THE MISADVENTURES OF THREE GOOD BOYS. Illustrated.
A COUNTRY LAWYER. Illustrated.
FARMING IT. Illustrated.

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
Boston and New York

THE MISADVENTURES OF THREE GOOD BOYS

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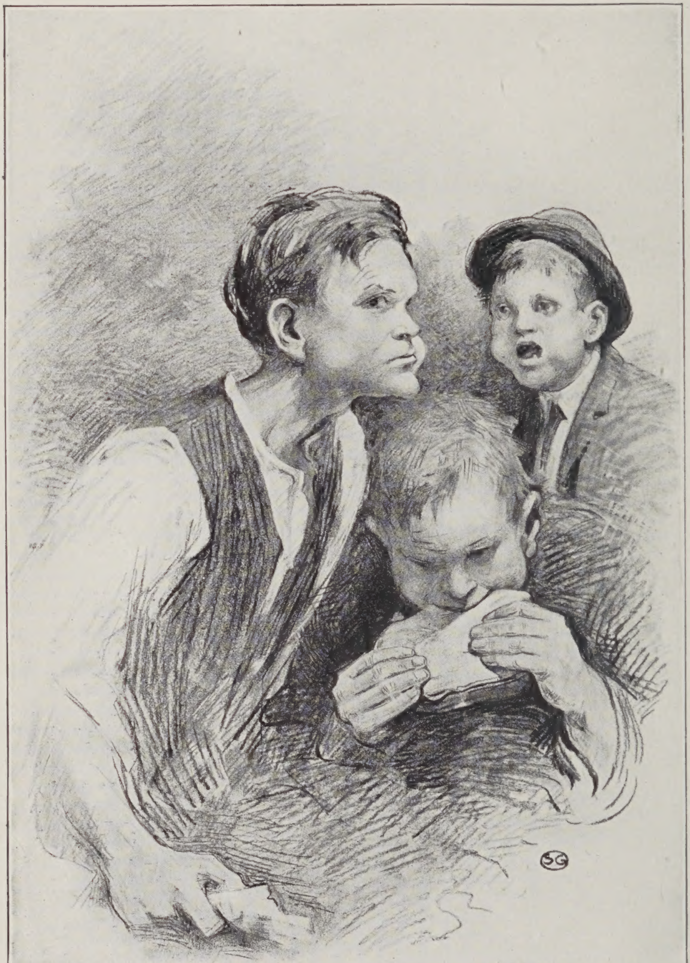

(page 156)

LUNCH TIME

THE MISADVENTURES OF THREE GOOD BOYS

THAT IS TO SAY, *FAIRLY* GOOD BOYS

BY

HENRY A. SHUTE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS
BY SEARS GALLAGHER

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverſide Preſs Cambridge
1914

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Published May 1914

"GEORGE"

"BRAD"

"WATS"

I DEDICATE this book to the memory of the fathers of Plupy, Beany, and Pewt, for many years close friends, respected and loyal citizens of Exeter, and known to hosts of devoted friends as "George," "Wats," and "Brad."

In the following pages they are known as the "conspirators," in a well-intentioned but futile effort to throttle ambition and to divert industry from its accustomed channels. To them the boys are indebted for countless acts of kindness.

EXETER, N. H.
March 30, 1914.

HENRY A. SHUTE.

PREFACE

The Author of this book invites the public, or such small percentage of the public as he may be able to reach by this book, to go back with him to the days when the forum for the discussion of all questions of importance was the grocery store; when the family coat-of-arms, the badge of respectability, the indicia of local eminence were the calfskin boot and the shaved upper lip surmounting the fan-shaped beard; when the frock coat and the stovepipe hat were the hall-marks of the professional man, as the hickory shirt, at times partly concealed by the false bosom, the paper collar, and the string tie, were of the yeoman; when the grocery store sported the sign, "W. I. Goods and Groceries," and the "W. I. Goods" collectively were legal tender at three cents a glass; when small boys' everyday clothing were a hickory shirt, one suspender, and trousers consisting of two patches and a hole; when the young man of the period sported the plug hat, the velvet coat, and the gray trousers of the dandy; when the livery stable flourished and the automobile was not; when the ashbarrel, the grease-tub, and soft soap were household necessities; when — but why go further?

> "Come back to your mother, ye children, for shame,
> Who have wandered like truants for riches and fame!"

HENRY A. SHUTE.

EXETER, NEW HAMPSHIRE,
December 20, 1913.

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From drawings by Sears Gallagher

THE MISADVENTURES OF THREE GOOD BOYS

I

THE LAMBASTER

THINGS had been going badly with Plupy of late. The general financial stringency in the money market was making itself felt in his vicinity, and Plupy himself was feeling the cruel pinch of poverty. Beany and Pewt were also struggling with pecuniary adversity and with great difficulty keeping their heads above water.

The spring store in the woodshed — with its gayly colored and homemade fly-boxes, Jacob's-ladders, snappers, pictures from the "Police News" and "Godey's Magazine"; its cigars manufactured of writing-book paper made into little cylinders by winding it round lead pencils and glueing the overlapping edges with gum arabic, removing the pencil, drying the cylinder, and stuffing it with sweet fern, hayseed, powdered mullein leaf, or dried corn-silk; its bar with the fly-specked, broken-nosed pitcher and handleless cups, from which was decanted and drunk sweetened water; its gaudy gilt ornaments, made by girl friends — had been long discontinued; its receipts in the shape of old iron, broken bolts and nuts, rusty nails, pieces of zinc and lead and copper, all of which were legal tender and easily exchangeable at the hardware stores, per pound, for cash, had been divided and lavished on gooseberries, jujube paste, taffy on a stick, cocoanut cakes, and other delightful and cloying confections.

Bankruptcy had then been avoided by collecting bones from back yards and gardens which, as the snow melted from the gardens, appeared in immense quantities, and were also the medium of exchange for cash at the same emporium.

But the period between the melting of the snow and the making of gardens was a very dry period for the boys. Never had those hard and mottled gooseberries in Si Smith's windows seemed half so attractive or so far removed. Never had the jujube paste looked so melting and so delicious.

"Got any chink?" "Not a gol-darned red," were the question and answer always heard when the boys met.

Several councils of war were held as the situation became desperate, and some original ideas were broached, which proved impracticable after consideration.

Beany advocated hiring a horse and taking parties out to ride, but diligent inquiry at the livery-stables was met with discouraging determination on the part of the proprietors to have payment in advance.

Plupy finally agreed to sell his collection of birds' eggs; but when he went to get them, found to his intense sorrow that a half-cord of wood had been dumped on them where he had carelessly left them overnight. Pewt was so overwhelmed by the seriousness of the loss that he had no scheme to offer; so Plupy again put on his thinking-cap and thought so vigorously that his brows were furrowed with lines, his ears moved, and his scalp twitched horribly as he scowled.

"Telyer what, fellers, p'r'aps if we can get anything to sell we could do suthin'. Lessee, Pewt, do yer father's hens lay any now?"

"They lay well enough, but since I hooked 'em the last time father keeps the door of the coop locked."

"Gorry," said Beany, "th' ain't nothin' at my house I can get."

"What about Pewt's printin'-press? We might print some cards," suggested Plupy.

"Huh! no, th' ain't no chance to do anything. The 'News Letter Job Print' will print cards cheaper than we can. Then most of the people who ordered cards would n't take 'em."

"'Course they would n't," scoffed Beany.

"You printed William Tanner's cards 'Bill Tanner,' 'n' Miss Margaret Donovan's, 'Mag Donovan'; whatjer 'spect?"

"Well, ennyway," said Pewt, by way of justification, "everybody calls 'em 'Bill' and 'Mag.'"

"We might print a newspaper. P'r'aps we could sell it. I heard my father say that the 'News Letter' was so tame that there was n't no fun in readin' it. He said th' was n't nothin' in it but 'somebody was enjoyin' the visit of somebody else,' or 'somebody had painted his house,' or 'somebody had gone to Eppin' for a visit,' or 'Willie Somebody had n't been absent nor tardy during the term.'"

"My father said," chimed in Beany, "that if somebody started a paper that would print real news in it he could make a barrel of money."

"I say, fellers," said Pewt, "les' try it. Franklin printed a paper once when he was a boy."

"Huh! Franklin did n't print no paper; he invented lightning," said Beany.

"Betcher!"

"Betcher!"

"Whattleyoubet?"

"Whattleyou?"

"Don't daster!"

"You don't daster neither!"

"Aw!"

"Aw!"

"Come on, fellers, quit jawin' now. How about printin' a newspaper?"

So a conference was held, and it was determined that the paper should be a weekly; that they should all contribute to the columns as writers and reporters, and labor at its setting-up as compositors, and when the sheet was completed, to hawk it through the town as newsboys.

The title caused them some heartburning and more or less raucous dispute. Pewt opined that a bold title like "A Jolt in the Slats" or "The Sidewinder" would have a tendency to attract the public eye and at the same time to concisely explain the viewpoint of the editors to be, "Hew to the line, let the chips fall where they may."

Plupy rather objected to the coarse materialism of the title and, being more of an impressionist than Pewt, suggested "The Echo," because as he said an echo never lied, but always repeated things correctly.

Beany said he did n't care a darn about the name; that the thing to do was to get the paper started and collect the "dosh" for it; and so after some further discussion it was decided to call it "The Lambaster," to indicate its policy of reform in "knockin' the everlastin' pea-green stuffin' outer folly, crime, and foolishness," as its prospectus, written by Plupy, stated.

The first edition of the paper opened with a short editorial by Plupy, in which he stated the crying need of an independent paper, "cauzed by thE eVazif polisy Of our IsteameD con TemPoraRy," pledging the "honner" of the editors and proprietors to deal with "plane fax," and to call a "spaid" a "sPaId" at "al" times.

Then followed a Fast Day proclamation of Governor Gilman's, which would have been correct but for the fact that Governor Gilman had been dead many, many years. But then this was of very little importance anyway. The only salient point was the announcement of the date.

The second column was taken up by original humor, copied, the greater part of it, from the back part of divers back numbers of "Harper's," to which magazine Plupy's father had for years been a subscriber.

Occasionally what might have been an original joke crept in, as this gem: — "What iS the cAuze of thE feerfull smelL on front Strete?" "Answer. The oDor of decaid jentility."

As Front Street was the one street sacred to the old families, some of whom were in rather reduced circumstances, this little fillip must have been intensely gratifying to them, and certainly delighted beyond measure certain of the plain people who were extremely jealous of the contemptuously termed "royal families."

An original, unquestionably original, poem, by

Beany, appeared, a poem with badly spavined meter, in which "home" rhymed, or was used to rhyme, with "groan," or, to be more accurate, "grone," and other slight imperfections. However, it was very sad, very melancholy, very hopeless, as was the fashion in those days.

There was some advertising matter on the second page, evidently space-filling only, without money and without price. Indeed, had it not been for one interesting notice, the readers of the paper would have had some misgivings as to the ostensible aim of the paper being in consonance with its title. This was in the nature of a friendly warning to a transgressor and read as follows: —

"If the Man with a red muchtach whitch worKs in the haRdware stoaR dont stopp hanGing rouNd the House on the conner of temple strete we will tell his wife and her husband in our paper. Sech things hadent aught to be alouD."

That the first edition of "The Lambaster" created a mild sensation was not surprising. The sale rapidly exhausted the supply of papers, only about one hundred having been printed. These sold readily at two cents and with the proceeds the editors, proprietors, compositors, foremen, and newsboys bought a large supply of paper and printers' ink and prepared for a red-pepper edition for the following week.

Now reformers generally do not have to look far for work. In any small or large community there are many abuses awaiting remedy, many nuisances to be abated, many conditions of things fairly pining for improvement. Sherlock Holmes found the services of small boys of the greatest service in ferreting out crime, and Sherlock was a very keen blade when he entrusted commissions to them.

So these three boys, thoroughly interested in their work and enthusiastic for the right, began to canvass the town in the interest of the Goddess Reform, and found abundant work. They listened to conversations, trailed reputable citizens after dark, hung around saloons, billiard halls, and barber shops, where gossip and scandal were dealt in both wholesale and retail, and as a result of their arduous labors they had amassed and printed, at the day of issue, a collection of items that astonished, amazed, delighted, scandalized, and horrified the entire population.

Even at this late day it would be unwise to do more than hint at the amazing disclosures of this first yellow journal, and say that but for the very opportune arrival of a disastrous fire which swept away a large part of the main business street of the town, the consequences of the publication would have been very far-reaching.

The editorial was short and to the point. It spoke of the determination of the editors to strangle the hydra-headed monster of debauchery and crime that had swept over the town, and to purify the manners and morals of the citizens; and the first crack off the bat was certainly a base hit. It was in the form of a question and answer which tended to show that the aim of the paper was to have a pat answer to any question asked.

"Question. Had enny mAn aught to go riding with a notHer man's wife at nite in a topP buGy. If he hazn't then Bill Archibald has dun rong last SaTuRday nite."

The next brought in six home runs.

"*Bewair!*

"Them six felLows whitch play cArdS over the oicster salooN oN thE conneR oF wAteR and scenter stRetes had beTTer stopp it. IF They DonT we shalL pubLiSh thAre naims. One wiRks in the PoSt ofFice, 1 wiRks in ThE founDry one in a druG sTorE, one in A growseRy stoRe and oNE don'T wirk enny. A worD to tHE wizE is suFissienT."

"*Dont get mAd Pat this is a frenDly wARning.*

"If Pat HennesSy licks his wifE AgAin we aRe going to tell whAre he gets his licker and then

Jack Devlin hAd bettEr look or he wIll be persecutED to the Extent of thE law."

"The biBle says thou shAlt not covEt thy naborS wIfe. if the rEveRent JosEph SnApp hAs got a bible We gess that leef is toar ouT. We hoAp we shAll not have to mEnshon this AgAin."

In this artless way did the editors enter the lists with folly, crime, and foolishness as their dread opponents. In this direct but unobtrusive manner did they seek to point out to erring sinners the straight and narrow path, to raise up the fallen, to help the unfortunate.

To say that the paper sold, would feebly express the tremendous rush for it. The paper containing the news of the firing on Sumter, or the surrender of Lee at Appomattox, was not fought for more eagerly than this little, unpretentious, uplifting tract bearing its message to the downfallen. Scarcely had the first piping calls of the newsboys shrilled out upon the balmy air of early morning when a ravenous mob surrounded them. Every one fought for papers; coppers, nickels, and even ten-cent pieces rained down upon the boys. Nobody waited for change, but as soon as he obtained the coveted sheet became absorbed in its contents, generally lifting his voice to heaven in loud howls of delight, and slapping his knee, and anon bending double with keen enjoyment.

Plupy, Beany, and Pewt were in their element. They had become literary characters; they were appreciated by their contemporaries; they were giving keen pleasure to hundreds; they were instituting reforms; they were making money; they jingled as they walked, jingled with silver, nickel, and copper. They ran their hands into their pockets and let the coins rattle through their fingers with musical clinkings. They wondered how much money they had earned. Sordid thoughts! What did the money amount to? Money! there was plenty of that; all they would have to do would be to publish their paper, and money would flow in upon them in a stream. But this was fame. Fame!

They strolled along looking patronizingly upon the convulsed crowd.

"Oh! You fellers do beat the devil," cried one man, holding his sides.

"That's right," said another; "give it to 'em. They ain't got no friends."

"I think you boys are doing the right thing," said a lady of severe cast of countenance, "and I only wish some of our grown men who publish papers had half of your courage. Really, you have reason to be proud."

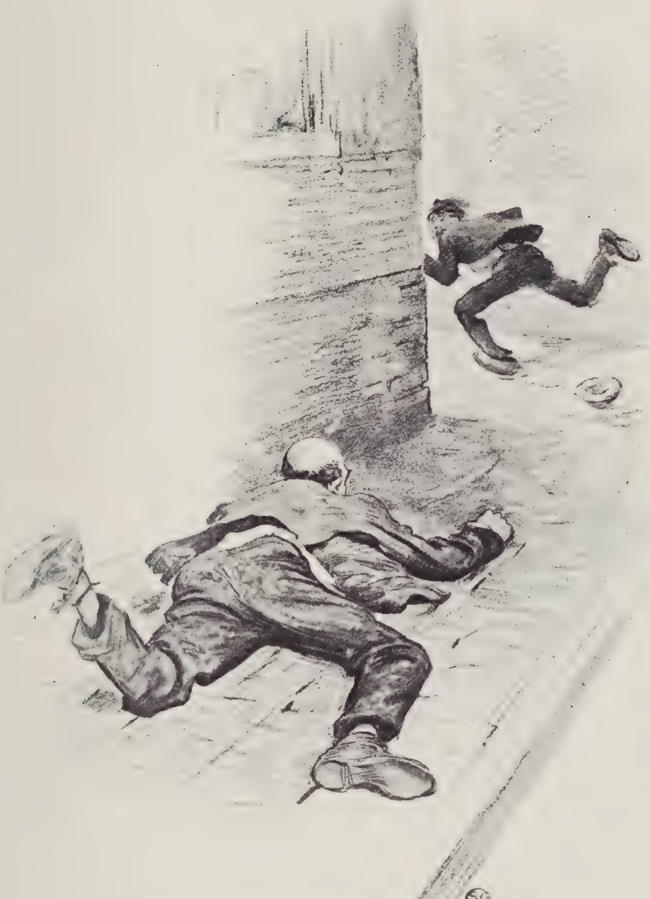
Whether or not the boys had reason to be proud, they certainly were very proud. This praise was as incense to their nostrils. They guessed their fathers and mothers would think they were pretty smart boys. Perhaps after this when they saw their sons going down to the Savings Bank every Friday to put in their "chink," they would be sorry for some things they had said to them and about them.

It required some courage and grit to publish the truth. It was n't everybody who dast to do it. The "News Letter" man did n't daster. Huh. Nobody need ever be afraid to speak the truth, and they guessed they were not afraid. Lessee, who was this feller comin' along? It looked like Bill Archibald. Gosh! it is Bill Archibald.

The three boys paused and visibly shrunk. "Gosh!" said Plupy; "d'ye s'pose he sees us?"

Just then Bill broke into a run pouring out blasphemies. Beany dashed down an alley with his legs going like spokes of a wheel. Pewt dove into a store and out the back way. Plupy, with the homing instinct of an Antwerp pigeon, dashed for home. Bill followed. Plupy had twenty yards' start and ran like a greyhound. With head thrown back, skinny arms gyrating like windmills and hands vigorously clawing the air, and long legs fairly whirring, he legged it for home.

Across the Square they went like flying shad-



BILL FELL FLAT ON HIS FACE

ows. Bill gained steadily. His outstretched hand came nearer and nearer to Plupy's collar. Now he had him; but, no, for Plupy, ducking like a rabbit, made a spasmodic, jumping-jack vault to one side, and Bill overreaching himself, fell flat on his face, and before he could rise Plupy turned the corner like a frantic daddylonglegs, and Bill, cursing like a pirate, turned down a side street.

The publication caused a most tremendous sensation. Those who were mentioned were wild with wrath and eager for revenge. One of the more violent even went to the point of declaring that if he could n't catch Plupy before night he would be on the lookout for Plupy's father at the five-thirty train from Boston and wipe the floor with him. Pewt's and Beany's respective fathers, having good reason to believe that Plupy was the ringleader in all the joint deviltry of the three boys, promptly and with generous vigor and impartiality tanned the hides of their respective sons and felt that they had made such amends for the outrage as lay within their power, and viewed the storm with complacency not unmixed with amused appreciation.

But Plupy's father was a different proposition. An extremely pliable, easy-going, and good-natured man, when handled right, he was one of the most obstinate, defiant, and mulish when any attempt was made to intimidate or to drive him.

Had any one of the injured parties approached him in a conciliatory spirit, and had said, "George, I feel pretty badly about this, and I look to you to set things right," he would have done everything to salve their wounded dignity and to make amends, and to this end Plupy would have fared badly under that precept of Holy Writ, "Woe to that man by whom the offense cometh."

Now, when Bill Archibald, thirsting for gore, met the elder Shute at the station and told him with many oaths, that unless he forthwith "whaled the liver outer that pup boy of his," he would "have his blankity blank tripe," and, further, indicated his due purpose of abstracting that worthy gentlemen's "tripe" by thrusting a gnarled and knotted fist under his nose, the old gentleman woke up to the situation with the most refreshing promptness, and when Bill was picked up from a tangle of hack-horses' feet —

"Dragged from among the horses' feet,
With dinted shield and helmet beat,
The falcon-crest and plumage gone,
Can that be haughty Marmion!" —

he was in no condition to come to time, if, indeed, he had wished to, which was extremely doubtful. Pat Hennessey and Jack Devlin, who were present to see the fun, and if advisable to take such part in it as might be necessary to reduce the elder Shute to a condition favorable to a compromise, decided without argument that the time was not propitious for interference, which showed that their judgment was sound in this instance, whatever it might have been in relation to the quality of liquor Jack dispensed.

When the elder Shute reached home, he was met by an agitated household. Plupy was always bringing them into trouble and disgrace. Plupy was always just escaping arrest and jail, and this time something dreadful would happen, and a copy of the fatal sheet was pressed into his hands.

Plupy's father sat down and read, sternly and unforgivingly. But as he read crinkly lines began to gather at the corners of his eyes, his eyes began to twinkle, and his lips to draw up at the corners. Finally, a chuckle, a snort, and then he threw back his head and roared. "Good!" he yelled, "good! the boys did n't say a word too much and they told the truth."

"So they are going to prosecute, are they? Well, let 'em prosecute and be hanged." And the old gentleman put up so stiff a front that those who came to curse, while they did not exactly remain to pray, still had their enthusiasm for war very perceptibly dampened after an interview with the outspoken old gentleman.

Happily that night the big Water Street fire broke out, and the consequent excitement and interest were such that the affairs of "The Lambaster" were allowed to drift into forgetfulness.

A few days later the three boys sat in Plupy's barn lunching delicately on cookies, doughnuts, cocoanut cakes, raw cocoanut, taffy, and gooseberries.

"Telyer what, fellers," said Plupy, "th' ain't any chance for a feller to do anything good in this world; every time he tries it, he gits lammed in the neck: might jest as well be a pirut."

"Thasso, Plupy," said Pewt, mumbling a huge gooseberry, "or a highway robber. Whadjer say, Beany?"

"Pass that cocoanut over here, will yer? Do you fellers want it all?" demanded Beany.

"Aw!" said Pewt.

"Aw!" assented Plupy.

II

PRISONERS OF HOPE

The summer term of the old Spring Street Grammar School in the little town of Exeter was drawing to a close. It had seemed, to the very lively boys of that town who were daily struggling with allopathic doses of Colburn's Arithmetic, Guyot's Geography, Hillard's Second and Third Readers, and Kerl's Common School Grammar, to say nothing of spelling, and the somewhat more than allopathic, say veterinary, doses of discipline incidental to the same, that vacation would never come, never!

Outside, the world was fair with the balmy brightness of a New England June, that month unsurpassed in charm. The birds had all arrived, and were mating, nesting, and filling the air with song. In the brooks and small pools the lily-pads had spread their thick, smooth leaves of waxen green, as yet undefiled by predaceous bugs and flies. Schools of small fish were darting about in the pools and streams, awaiting the black linen hand-braided lines and small blue steel "minny" hooks of the boys. And right here I wish to explode the oft-exploited theory of catching fish with a bended pin and piece of tow-string. I have nothing to say against the tow-string, but I am gunning for the bended pin of song and story. Away with it! A murrain on it! Years ago, when one of these very boys of whom I am writing, I spent a long time in vainly trying to catch a fish with a pin hook. I was led to believe that this feat had been the favorite accomplishment of rural youth from time immemorial, from hearing a very charming young lady, traveling with Father Kemp's Concert Singers, render a touching ballad entitled "Swinging in the Lane," in which a small but sentimental boy had passed the greater part of a delightful boyhood in catching minnows, with "bended pin for hook," and swinging in the lane with a demure but bewitching damsel known as "Rosy Nell." In common with the rest of the audience I fell very much in love with the vocalist, and as she went away with the rest of the singers on the morning train without a look or a thought for me, I became a prey to melancholy and spent a week or more in futile efforts to emulate the hero of the song. But I never could catch a fish. Either the pin would not hold the bait and the fish merely knocked it off with its nose and swallowed it, or the pin pulled out without damage to the fish. Once in a great while I would prick a small fish a bit, but it always escaped little the worse for the adventure. However, I soon conquered my burning passion for the perfidious cantatrice that sang such arrant nonsense, at least in reference to a "bended pin for hook"; I say nothing derogatory of Rosy Nell and the swing. I respect her, it, and the combination of him, her, and it. And so good came out of it after all, for I recovered my spirits.

But to return to the boys. They are still prisoners in the schoolhouse, and the sun and the breeze and the birds and squirrels are calling them away, and their legal protectors and their school-teacher will not let them away, and the long days of school life pass on leaden wings. To be sure, one can get up in the morning and go down into Moulton's or Gilman's field and pick bunches of purple, white, or dogtooth violets, and on Jady Hill there are bluebells, and in a certain place in the Eddy Woods are lady's-slipper, and in one place, which Plupy and Potter only know, are bunches of trillium.

And after school at five o'clock there is time for a swim and a little fishing and some birds'-egging, and there is the noon recess when there is "Three Old Cat" in the school-yard. Yes, of course, there is some fun, but the boys are tired of school. It never occurred to them that perhaps their vigorous, muscular, and enthusiastic instructor, Old Francis, was just as tired of school as they were, and longed, oh! so much, to get out of the dreary round of subject nominatives and predicate verbs, and participial nouns, and inversion of the divisor and proceeding as in multiplication, and carrying one to the next column, and of the minuend and the subtrahend, the divisor and the dividend; of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, Barca, and Egypt, and of the thirty-seven States (there were but thirty-seven then), and ten Territories (there are less now), and the District of Columbia; of the railroad train that was rushing ahead at almost lightning speed with a curve just ahead; of old Jacob Stock, the hard-hearted rich man, than whom the chimes of the clock were not more punctual in proclaiming the progress of time; of Nebo's lonely mountain on this side Jordan's wave; of the old and haughty Czar, who was lonely, though princes girt him round and leaders of the war; of the fingers weary and worn, of the eyelids heavy and red; of the warrior who bowed his crested head and tamed his heart of fire, and sued the haughty king to free his long-imprisoned sire; of the grave too cold and damp for a soul so warm and true, of the Lake of the Dismal Swamp, the firefly lamp, the paddle and the white canoe; of Uncle Abel, the most perpendicular, rectangular, upright, downright good man that ever labored six days and rested on the seventh; of the slumber of the brave who sink to rest, by all their country's wishes blest, where Spring with dewy fingers cold returns; of the winged winds that round his pathway roared; of the fact that next to Washington, Greene was the ablest commander in the Revolutionary army, above the middle height and strongly made; of the cold gray stones and the stately ships that went on and on and on, and Stout Lartius and Ocnus of Falerii, and Horatius; of Campania's hinds and the thrice accurséd sail, and the great Lord of Luna who fell at that deadly stroke; of news of battle that was ringing down the street; of old Tubal Cain in the days when the earth was young; of the chief who in silence strode before; of the supercilious nabob of the East, — haughty, being great, — purse-proud, being rich, — a governor or general in the least, I have forgotten which; and of the humble youth, a lad of decent parts and good repute.

Perhaps the one thing that kept them from despair in the hours of their dreary imprisonment was the Nightingale and Oliver Optic and Horatio Alger. The Nightingale was the school songbook, and the half-hour of song was always a welcome interruption to study and recitation. And the hours when the instructor would read stirring youthful tales of favorite authors were all too delightfully short.

The object of this sagacious and far-seeing teacher was twofold, or, to speak more correctly, threefold. His own endurance and that of the boys and girls was nearing the limit; he wished to inculcate habits of industry in his charges by reading to them of the small but noble-minded boy who resolutely put aside the joyous pastimes of boyhood and, putting his immature but sinewy hands to the plough or his undeveloped but powerful shoulder to the wheel, saved his father's or mother's homestead from the cruel and interest-bearing mortgage that hung over their heads like the sword of Damocles, or like a pail of water over the doorway with a small boy at the end of the string, and gained a place in the counting-room of the rich but just merchant whose business he had saved from destruction by wonderful, not to say uncanny, but wholly precocious business sagacity.

Secondly, our sagacious instructor saw the advisability of applying a judicious safety-valve to the pupils' unrest; and thirdly, he liked the stories himself.

Now these stories were excellent in their way. The heroes were excellent and quite impossible youth, with an eye to the main chance and with "Excelsior" as their motto. They always succeeded in their high aim, against insurmountable obstacles, of accomplishing the impossible, and they always got their reward in the last chapter if not before. They were dreadful prigs, but their ability to fight reconciled the boys to them. Before "planting" their small but iron fists between the eyes of the bully, who, we must admit, needed a thrashing dreadfully, they made a speech deprecating the necessity of fighting, removed coat, vest, and braces, — never suspenders or even galluses, — rolled up their sleeves displaying arms corded with muscle, and in a series of beautifully arranged rounds whipped the bully until he begged for mercy, and thereby a beautiful lesson and a strong moral were inculcated.

In spite of the fact that the fights between the boys in this school and in every school, out of books, were a whirlwind of pulling hair, punching, and wrestling with no holds barred, and were continued until one of the combatants hollered "Nuff!" the boys took these tales without a single grain of salt and believed in them absolutely. It was one of the tragedies of boyhood to learn that "Hope and Have," "Haste and Waste," "Work and Win," and kindred narratives were not veritable biographies. Alas and alack, for Waddie Wimpleton and Tommy Toppleton, and Ragged Dick of fragrant memory.

But at that time in the boys' lives there were giants, and their example could not fail to im-press the boys with a desire to be sober, industrious, successful, and to develop arms corded with muscles and to thrash the local bully, whoever he might be, and wherever he might have an abiding place. And when at last, after a most interminable time, the term closed, they began the long vacation with a concrete determination to make a name for themselves as sober, progressive, and reputable citizens with iron fists and corded arms.

Of course, they had to luxuriate for a couple of weeks in the glorious days of ease, in which they fished, swam, went birds'-egging, trapped squirrels and rabbits; — that is to say, they set traps and had those moments of breathless anticipation in finding, as the old colored man said, "dem 'ar traps sprong and nuffin' cotch."

But after a while these mere amusements palled upon them. Their companions were at work. Fatty Gilman was daily seen with old Edward Giddings, the white-haired, magnificent old manager of the great Gilman farm, journeying to and from the hay-fields and tilled land. Skinny Bruce was working for J. Getchell & Son, learning the business of tinsmith, a calling in which he afterwards became locally eminent. Tady Finton was driving the milk cart from the Cilley farm, an engagement that proved to be only temporary, as Tady improved the opportunity to race the old gray plug with every horse he overtook, with the result that a great deal of the milk was churned to butter before delivery.

Scott Brigham was waiting on table in the Squamscott Hotel; Ed Towle was driving a baggage-wagon to the beach; Potter Gorham was collecting specimens for the Smithsonian at Washington; the three Chadwick boys were whitewashing their fences and sheds and cultivating their fine garden and sawing innumerable cords of wood in the rear of their house. Pop Clark was learning the printer's trade of Smith, Hall & Clark, of the Exeter "News Letter"; Fatty Melcher was peddling shavings from the planing-mill and his father's carriage-shop; and other boys of their acquaintance were engaged in a variety of pursuits.

Plupy, Beany, and Pewt were uneasy. As long as they were playing and the other boys working they felt ill at ease. Had they been working and the other boys playing, they would have felt much the same. They wanted to do what the other boys were doing. They were gregarious animals. All small boys are. In this lies a moral, but one not readily recognized.

So they discussed the prospect of employment. They objected to severe manual labor, such as raking hay, pitching it, and especially storing it away in a hot, choky, dusty mow. They had no especial objection to riding on the loads or driving the horserake. On mature consideration they decided that haymaking was not for them. Then they objected to gardening as too prosaic an occupation for youths of their peculiar talents. And they were not going to give the lie to precedent by engaging in such jog-trot and uninteresting employment; for no one of those priggish heroes in the Oliver Optic books did work of this nature. Ragged Dick blacked boots and sold papers and fought with street Arabs and stopped runaway horses and became great. So would they do.

They would be glad to enter the drunkard's cheerless home and chop wood and build a fire to keep the poor wife and her helpless babes from starvation and freezing to death. But they did not know of any drunkards' wives and children who were in any such desperate circumstances, and if they had, it was summer and they would not freeze anyway, don't you see? And as for fighting with street Arabs, why, what if they got licked? It would be far better to develop their corded and muscular arms first. Most of the street Arabs could fight, especially the Franklin-Streeters.

Some of the heroes they had read about had guided people round great cities and had carried their baggage from the railroad stations. Ha! that was it. They would do that. True, Exeter was not a great city, but people came to it every day in the summer; lots of people. Then the station, especially at the 9 o'clock morning train from Boston and the 5.30 P.M., was a busy place. The huge and many-seated beach wagons were filling up with passengers, the Exeter citizens who had business in Boston were going and coming, the hackmen were fighting over passengers and baggage, and things were very lively and exciting.

So with great enthusiasm they voted to become guides, philosophers, friends, and baggage-smashers to curious summer visitors, and the next morning were on hand at the railroad station prepared to escort parties of excursionists through the town, and to get as much amusement as possible from the lively scenes that daily in the summer season took place at that noted station and its then famous restaurant. They met with little success at first, for people coming to town seemed fairly contented to carry their own baggage or to take one of the numerous conveyances, instead of walking, as Plupy expressed it, "on their own hind legs and givin' a feller a chance to earn a little honest chink."

Then the good-natured courtesy of the citizens of the town toward strangers made maddening inroads on the little business they obtained. Did either Plupy, Beany, or Pewt secure a customer and proudly start for the main street with his carpet-bag, along would come James William Odlin, or Abner Merrill, or Amos Tuck, or William B. Morrill, or some one of the many Exeter men who daily went to Boston, and would jovially hail the stranger and annex him and his carpet-bag, leaving the unfortunate guide, philosopher, friend, and baggage-smasher staring blankly after his fleeting chance of gain and bewailing his luck.

Still they persisted, and as they were polite and pleasant, they earned quite a little money for a week or ten days; and taking into account the fights between rival hackmen and drivers of express and baggage-wagons, the races between the driving horses of sporting patrons of the road, occasional runaways, and other things incidental to travel to and from the station, they felt that they were seeing life and becoming prosperous.

But unfortunately there were many other boys who were equally anxious for the small change earned by these boys, and competition became so fierce that it soon developed into lively warfare, in which our three boys were speedily wiped off the business map, and retired in huge disgust and greatly damaged from a business that yielded them little but bruises and desperate chases through fields and across lots to their own bailiwick.

But they were only temporarily discouraged, and after a week of recuperation, which included swimming, fishing, bullfrogging, and picking wild strawberries which were then ripe, they looked about for another chance to emulate the heroes of Oliver Optic.

This time they decided upon a nautical life, a sort of fresh-water seafaring occupation that appealed to them very strongly. The keeper of a periodical store in the square owned a large, commodious, and safe boat which he rented to picnic parties. There were many other boats on the river, but this was the largest and safest. For its size it rowed very easily, but was used, for the most part, by parties and not by twos or threes. As Mr. Simpson, commonly known as "Hen," could spare but little time from his business to pilot his patrons up the beautiful and winding stream, he had to cast about for reliable assistants.

He found willing assistants in these three boys. He knew them as good oarsmen, swimmers, and fishermen who knew the river. To be sure, in case of accident they might not be quite as efficient life-savers as grown men, but there was only one chance in a thousand of any accident happening in that boat, it was so large and stanch. He got but a dollar and a half a day for the boat, and fifteen cents an hour for short trips. He would have had to pay a man one dollar and a half for his services; the boys would cost nothing, as the picnic parties would be expected to give them something; and if they neglected to do so, he would not be expected to give them more than five or ten cents each. So they were engaged and entered upon their duties at once.

They bailed out the boat, scrubbed the seats and inside, scraped the oars, and tacked a tin rim on the edge of the blades, which were somewhat frayed and split from long use, whittled out fresh tholepins, and did about four dollars' worth of work on the old boat, for which they received nothing and which they greatly enjoyed doing.

Then they awaited business which was not long in coming. The second morning after their engagement a party of Westerners came from the beach, riding thither in one of those dreadfully uncomfortable but gaudily painted beach wagons to spend a day on the river. There were eight of them, and they brought with them ample provisions of chicken, bread and butter, cake, pies, and fruit, which the boys carefully stowed in the cuddy at the bow of the boat and later generously partook of at the kind invitation of their passengers. Plupy and Beany rowed, while Pewt, sitting in the bow of the boat, called off the names of the points of interest, — Little River, The Oak, Sandy Bottom, The Gravel, The Cove, Cove Bridge, The Willows, Fool's Corner, The Eddy; and as he was a youth of very vivid imagination he clothed the history of these points with love, romance, and adventure, in which tales Plupy and Beany, not to be left out, pantingly and gruntingly chipped in with stirring reminiscence, greatly to the amusement and entertainment of the party, none of whom had ever met the peculiar brand of small boy that Exeter produced.

Nor had they, accustomed to the wide, shallow, sandy, and ofttimes muddy Western streams, ever seen so beautiful a New England stream: so smooth and deep and winding; so fringed with overhanging alders, willows, silvery birches, and flowering bushes; so shaded with giant pines, grand oaks, spreading beeches, and dark-green spruces and hemlocks; so bordered by lily-pads; so shot with sunshine and flecked with shadows. It was a revelation to them, and they gave the boys' highly seasoned narratives much more credit than they deserved, I am afraid.

At noon they landed at the Eddy picnic grounds, built a fire, unpacked their lunch, and ate it *al fresco*, and in the afternoon dropped down the winding stream to the boat-landing and declared it the pleasantest day they had experienced in the East, and promised the boys it should be the beginning of a series of like trips; which pleased them exceedingly, especially as they gave them fifty cents to divide among themselves, and complimented them highly on their skillful seamanship and their entertaining conversation.

The next day they took up a party of old ladies and gentlemen who were staying at the Squamscott Hotel and who wished to sail upon a New England stream. These people were from the South, and had been used to the turbid, muddy streams that ran between acres of canebrakes and through lowland wooded with live-oaks and Southern pine, the former festooned and hung with Spanish moss and trailing vines; and they in their turn were fascinated and delighted with the experience and spoke highly of and to their three guides and boatmen, and with the proverbial generosity of the South gave them fifty cents apiece as largess.

The next day business was slack and the only benefit they derived from their engagement was a short fishing trip after the possibility of patronage had dwindled to nothing. However, they did not repine, because the next day, Saturday, was the annual picnic of the First Congregational Sunday School, and the boat had been engaged several weeks before for that date, and they reckoned confidently upon a very lucrative employment. "For," as Plupy said, "every old pod will want us to row 'em up 'n' down the river, 'n' there will be so many who 'll want to go that we'll hafter give 'em pretty short rides, 'n' of course they'll all wanter pay suthin' fer it."

"Telyer what, fellers," said Beany, baring his plump arm and doubling it up to show the swelling muscles, which were not at all evident to any eyes but his own, "we've got a hard day before us to-morrer 'n' Pewt's got to do his share of the rowin' stidder sittin' in the bow of th' boat 'n' yoppin' like he's ben doin' last two days."

"Thasso, Beany," said Plupy, with energy; "we fellers ain't goin' to pull our arms outer the sockets while Pewt don't do nothin' but lie to the folks; that's me every time, old Pewt," he finished by directing his remarks to that able diplomat.

"Huh," sneered Pewt, "I was willin' to do my share of the rowin,' only you fellers was so anxious to show off yer rowin' that I thought I'd let yer. You wa'n't so smart as ye thought."

"Well, ennyway, you'll do your part to-morrer," said Beany, with decision.

In fact they all did.

The next day was bright and sunny with a light breeze to temper the heat of the sun. The boat-landing was thronged at an early hour with old and middle-aged gentlemen in black broadcloth coats, an excellent and appropriate garment for a picnic in the open; young gentlemen in yellow linen suits, ladies of uncertain age in black bombazine dresses, younger ones, in cool white, and countless girls and boys in their best clothes, so appropriate for a day in the woods.

There were baskets, hampers, boxes, pails, and brown-paper parcels; there were haste, hurry, arguments as to precedence, arguments over the capacity and relative stanchness of the boats, loud demands to put "this here" and "that there," hoarse entreaties to "get off my fingers," and queries as to the propriety of sitting down on the squash pie. There were shrieks as timid maidens stepped mincingly into the boats, cries of warning as the boats rocked, and charges to be very careful, interspersed with shouts of "Me next," and "Well, I should say, ain't she mean!" and other sounds of festivity incidental to the embarkation of a Sunday-School picnic.

The picnic grounds were a mile and a half from the boat-landing and all the boats had to make several trips, and as they raced the entire distance each way, the boys were reduced to mere skeletons by the time they landed the last merrymaker. Then, and before they were allowed time to recover, they were in constant demand to row parties to this point and to that point, parties who did not pay and seemed to regard them as mere parts of the boat's locomotive machinery, and gave them little rest and no reward.

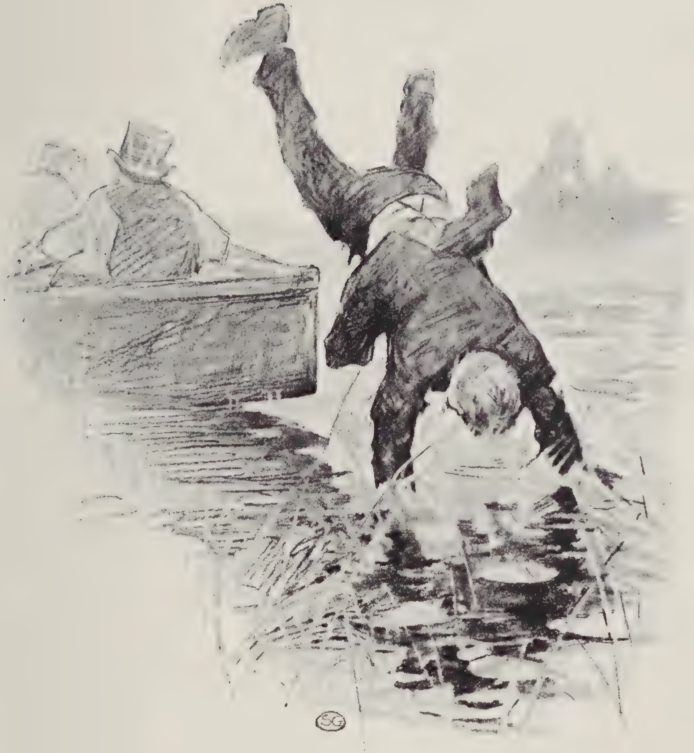
Up to this time the only consolation they had derived from the excursion was in contemplating the dripping coat-tails of that good deacon, Thomas Edwin Folsom, which, from his seat in the extreme stern of the boat, had been dragging in the water the entire distance from the landing to the picnic grounds.

They did, however, full justice to the noontime lunch, which was ample, generous, and of such variety that in all probability the vigorous exercise they had taken, and were to take before the close of the day, was the one thing that saved them from that epidemic of stomach-ache that generally follows a Sunday-School picnic.

After dinner their services were in immediate requisition, and while the young people were shrieking in swings and playing at all sorts of lively games that seemed to call for every variety of hideous howl and shriek, they again took to their boat and rowed solemn elderly parties up and down the river, and listened to sage and smug reflections over the beauty of the landscape, the river, and nature in general. Did they venture a remark calculated to enliven the excursion, they were told that they should n't interrupt their elders, whereupon they became mute and possibly a bit sulky.

Occasionally they were asked, or rather commanded, to give up their oars to vigorous but unskilled passengers, and there was some enjoyment in viewing their abortive but powerful efforts to row. That amusement culminated in most unholy glee when the Reverend Thankful Whittaker, a distinguished guest, having caught a crab, fell over backwards with his cloth-booted heels in the air, hitting the Honorable Joshua Robinson, who was trying to keep stroke with him, a severe blow on the nose, and was asked by that sorely stricken and justly but momentarily irritated gentleman, "what in thunder he was tryin' to do?"

And later on when, under the mistaken zeal of two equally unskillful oarsmen, the boat suddenly grounded on the bank, and a black-coated church member, who was standing up in the boat waving a white handkerchief gracefully to a group of ladies on the bank, was sent heels over head into about six inches of water, mud, lily-pads and pickerel weed, it fully paid for their hard and unremunerated toil. It was late that evening when they landed their last passenger. They locked the boat to its ring, and limped slowly homeward. Their arms and backs were strained, their hands sore and blistered, their legs so tired that



HEELS OVER HEAD INTO ABOUT SIX INCHES OF WATER

they could scarcely walk, and when they crawled into bed they were almost too tired to think.

The next day was Sunday and they could rest, and rest they did all day, scarcely stirring from their homes. On Monday they were feeling much better, but were not sorry when evening came without any call for their services. They were somewhat disappointed when they only succeeded in getting fifteen cents out of their employer for their Saturday's work, but beyond grumbling among themselves, said nothing.

On Tuesday they had completely recovered, and greatly to their delight took out their beach friends and were rewarded as before. On Wednesday they did the same for their Southern patrons with suitable emolument, and on Friday another party from the beach came, under the kind recommendation of their first patrons. On Saturday the boat was hired by a party who preferred to do their own rowing, and the boys rather enjoyed their leisure in taking an account of stock and planning for the future. They were very prosperous, and felt that they could slacken the bent bow a bit with profit.

The next week opened prosperously in the arrival of a party from Rye Beach which came over the road in two very elegant equipages, left them at the Squamscott Hotel stables, and engaged the boat and the boys. They were quite a bit more critical than the other parties, and found fault with the boat, and the heat of the sun, and the mosquitoes, and the ants in the food, and other things that are looked upon as indispensable to a well-conducted picnic.

They kept the boys very busy in doing various unnecessary things, — at least, so it seemed to the boys; who although well paid at the close of the engagement, felt that they had more than earned their money. Pewt summed up the opinion of the boys by saying with profound wisdom, "Some rich folks don't know nothin', nohow. Ain't I right, fellers?" And Plupy and Beany at once indorsed his opinion cordially.

On Tuesday they took out two parties for two-hour trips which paid them well in cordial appreciation of their efforts to please and in pecuniary reward, and in the afternoon they were greatly pleased at receiving from the Western friends a note asking them to have the boat ready for them at nine o'clock sharp the next morning; that they were to bring a very distinguished friend, a Western gentleman who was very anxious to view the beauties of the Exeter River and experience the courtesies of the Exeter boys.

This prospect was so exhilarating to the three boys that they arose betimes or somewhat earlier the next morning and washed, scrubbed, and polished their boat, and made every preparation for the comfort of their guests.

Promptly at nine they arrived, bubbling over with life and spirits, and bringing with them a very distinguished-looking man of about thirty-five, who was introduced as Colonel Manley, a veteran and commander of a regiment in the Middle West during the late war. The Colonel was affability itself, and shook their hands like another boy and spoke very highly of what he had heard of their courtesy to his friends and of their ability as oarsmen, guides, and fishermen.

When they arrived at the picnic grounds they grounded their boat, and the Eminent Westerner assisted the ladies up the bank, while the boys followed them, laden with cushions, wraps, and rugs, which they spread out on the smooth coating of dry pine needles, around a blackened space overlooking the water, where the camp-fire was generally lighted. Then leaving the supplies in the cuddy of the boat, where the Eminent Westerner thought they would be cooler, the boys scoured the pine growth for cones, which they brought in by armfuls, plentifully smearing their hands and clothing with pitch, while their guests commented admiringly on their activity and willingness. Then they cut up a prodigious quantity of dry pine limbs and stumps and kindled a fire, around which the guests sat at a safe distance from the heat of the flames and chatted with great satisfaction over the beauties of the woods, the sky, the river, the bright, dancing flames, and the extreme courtesy of these delightful New England boys, so charming a contrast to the ruder youth of the Middle West, who had, unfortunately, shown so great a need of training in the courtesies of their New England brothers. And as they rattled on, the boys brought water from the clear spring in the bank just above the water-line, filled the kettle, improvised a crane by laying a cross-pole over two crotched-sticks and hung the kettle thereon, piled up wood within easy reach, and did their utmost to make the party comfortable, to deserve their appreciation, and incidentally to earn a generous stipend at the end of the trip.

And here the Eminent Westerner made a suggestion that filled them with delight.

"Look here, boys, I reckon you could n't take the boat out and catch us a mess of red snappers or catfish and dress 'em for us, could you?" he asked.

"Red snappers, what's them?" asked Pewt.

"'N' catfish, too; I never seen any," said Beany.

The Eminent Westerner laughed. "Why, red snappers are a very common and delicious fish in the Western rivers. The Mississippi is full of them and of catfish. The latter have a skin like an eel, no scales, a wide mouth, and sharp spines in the side fins just back of the head."

"Oh, I know," said Plupy; "we call 'em hornpouts or bull-heads here; they grunt when you catch 'em, 'n' are the only fish that can do that. But we don't have any red snappers here."

"We got the red striped perch," said Pewt quickly, jealous of the reputation of the East.

"'N' pickerel, 'n' shiners," said Beany.

"'N' roach, 'n' eels, 'n' hornpout, — busters, some of them," squealed Pewt.

"'N' suckers, only we don't eat 'em; only hens 'n' cats 'n' niggers," shouted Plupy.

"'N' hogbacks, 'n' trout," roared Pewt.

"'N' striped minnies," yelled Beany.

"'N' bullfrogs," screamed Plupy.

"'N' mud-turtles," shouted Pewt and Beany in unison.

"'N' — 'n' — 'n' water snakes," stuttered Plupy.

Nobody could give any other specimens offhand, and the enumeration ceased.

"Well," said the Eminent Westerner, laughing, "that is a pretty good bill of fare to choose from. How many are good to eat?"

"All of 'em except suckers 'n' water snakes," said Pewt.

"Well, I reckon you can also leave out the mud-turtles and bullfrogs, this time, anyway," said the Eminent Westerner.

"Them's the best of all," said Plupy; "you jest get a old bullfrog off the hook, 'n' ketch him by the hind legs 'n' bang his head over the edge of the boat till he don't kick any more, 'n' then cut off his hind legs 'n' skin 'em 'n' fry 'em in butter 'n' meal, 'n' there ain't nothin' better in this world."

"For mercy sakes! Is that the way you do?" said one of the ladies.

"Yes," said Plupy, mistaking her tone for one of deep admiration; "'n' sometimes when you give a old bullfrog a slam his stomach will come out wrongside to 'n' a lot of water-snail shells will rattle out all over the boat."

"Horrible!" said the lady, in disgust.

"Ho, that ain't nothin'," said Pewt, not to be outdone; "when you ketch a turtle you can build a fire under him 'n' he 'll crawl out of his shell. 'N' there is every sort of meat in him. Fish, 'n' hen, 'n' muskrat."

"'N' dove, 'n' steak, 'n' ham, 'n' pig," said Plupy.

"'N' calf, 'n' hoss, 'n' squash, 'n' turnip," chimed in Beany.

"'N' boiled eggs, 'n' sheep, 'n' muskmelon, 'n' everything else," said Plupy comprehensively; and then stopped in surprise, for the lady had risen and stood looking at him with marked disfavor.

"Do you mean to say, boys, that you ever did such cruel things to frogs and turtles?" she demanded, with fire in her eyes and indignation ringing in her voice.

"What, we fellers?" said Plupy, in well-feigned astonishment; "well, I guess not!" He added, "We fellers never did no such things as them. Only the Franklin-Streeters and Nigger-Hill fellers does them things. I was jest a-tellin' yer how they done it, 'n' how mean it was, wa'n't I, Pewt?"

"Yes, 'course you was. 'T 's meaner 'n tripe, but them fellers do it every time. They had ought to be arrested," answered that worthy, quickly and to the point.

"Thasso, Pewt," asserted Beany, with conviction.

The fire died out of the lady's eyes and a pleasant smile brightened her solemn face.

"There, boys, I believe you," she said, with an air of relief. "I know you are gentlemen. Now, go along and fish and don't be gone over an hour."

Much relieved, the boys ran out their boat, and paddled round the corner and up the stream, baiting their hooks, and looking for likely places where they could try a cast.

Back on the bluff the party of Westerners lay back at ease and chatted as only volatile Western people, in love with life and enjoying every moment, can chat and laugh. At times they replenished the fire and moved back where they could enjoy the dancing flames without absorbing any more heat than the sun's rays gave. An hour passed pleasantly. The sun was at the meridian, and from the sleepy village a mile away came the measured toll of the twelve o'clock bell chiming the hour of high noon. At the last stroke the mill whistle roared, its hoarse voice mellowed by the distance.

The Eminent Westerner arose and stretched himself.

"Twelve o'clock," he said, "and I'm beginning to think of dinner-time. Let's see, those boys have been gone an hour. I should think it almost time for them to have caught enough fish. It will take some time to clean and fry them. I think I will call them."

"No," said another, "wait awhile. Those boys know what they are about and you may be sure they will be back in good season. We can trust them."

So they waited another half-hour, three quarters, an hour. The distant bell tolled one, and the mill whistle roared.

"Is n't it pleasant to know that we can lie here and have no business cares to bother us like those of the working people who have to go back to the shops and factories!" sighed a young blonde, luxuriously lying back against a pile of cushions.

"Well, I don't know about that," chimed in a black-eyed girl; "the shop people have had their dinners, and we have n't, and I am as hungry as a coyote."

"That's so," said the Eminent Westerner; "it's about time those boys were back. I'll call them." And he projected a call into the wild that sounded like the bellow of a bull-buffalo. There was no reply. Again he called, and again.

In the distance a cow lowed, at hand a red squirrel snickered, and these with the splash of a leaping fish were the only sounds heard. A slow color began to steal into the Eminent Westerner's sallow cheeks.

"I wonder where those young scamps are? It seems to me they ought to know enough to come back to dinner. I never knew a Western boy to be as stupid as that," he said fretfully.

. . . .

When the boys rowed around the first bend they made several casts as they went along, but without result, and they had gone nearly half a mile before they got their first bite. This proved to be a fair-sized pickerel which Beany landed, or rather boated. Then Pewt got another bite, but lost the fish.

A quarter of a mile beyond, Pewt landed a yellow perch weighing three quarters of a pound, — a beauty. Then Plupy had a bit of luck and swung a beautiful silvery roach into the boat.

There are certain days on the river when fish seem to bite well. There seems to be no reason for this. Sometimes it is hot, sometimes cool; sometimes rainy, sometimes fair. It seems to be like luck in a game of chance. As gamblers say, follow your luck. Fishermen are gamblers, none more so; and these boys felt instinctively that this was a fish day and that luck was with them, and they determined to show these delightful but benighted Westerners what a string of Eastern fish was like. This was an honest, zealous, high-minded, and locally patriotic intention, but before they had proceeded far they had entirely forgotten all about their guests.

On they went, loudly cheering each lucky catch, wild with excitement; "darning their luck," with all manner of homely and ludicrous expletives, when a hooked fish wriggled off just before they got their eager hands on it; "ouch"-ing with vigor when a sharp spine or a barbed hook pinched their fingers; calling loudly for bait, and wondering "where in time that half minny went."

"Gimme a strip off th' belly of that roach?" asked Pewt of Plupy.

"Huh! I guess not; take the belly of your own fish. I ain't goin' ter spoil that one," sneered Plupy.

"Whatcher steppin' on my perch for?" yelled Beany, as Pewt, in trying to jump from one seat to another, smashed the head of one of Beany's fish to a jelly.

But in spite of minor misfortunes, they were having unheard-of luck, and each one's string was growing. Already they were more than two miles from the picnic party, the members of which were in a starving condition, and judging from their actions and language were very unreconciled, not to say rebellious, over their fate. Again and again the Eminent Westerner sent his big voice echoing over the fields and through the woods. Again and again the weaker members sent high and shrill soprano calls soaring afar, but the boys heard nothing. Nor could they be heard, for they were too far away and behind a rise in the land where the river crept between two wooded hills.

It was now three o'clock. Back at the picnic grounds a party of hungry, starving, furious Western people, but lately care-free and happy, were discussing what they would do to these miserable rascals, these infernal little street Arabs, these designing little thieves, these inhuman wretches who had so taken advantage of their kindness and whom they had loaded with favors.

One lady had suspected it from the first. She had seen something shifty and evasive in their eyes, something furtive and treacherous in their evil little faces, and had thought at that time that they were taking great chances with the wretches.

Another said she had always been told that one could not trust a New England boy, that they were the most unreliable set in America. For her part, give her a good, honest, homely Western boy, reliable and honest, dependable and clear-eyed.

Three o'clock had come and gone. The Eminent Westerner, with murder in his heart and blasphemy upon his lips, had made short excursions up the river to no purpose. Four o'clock struck in the distant village. Already the shadows were creeping eastward. Half-past four, and the tinkle of the cowbell on old Speckle Face, the leader of the Gilman herd, sounded supper-like as she led her followers toward the road.

The party, gathering up cushions and blankets, followed. They knew not the country, but the Eminent Westerner knew cows. "They will lead us somewhere," he said; "and when I catch those infernal boys —" he gritted his teeth and clenched his hand meaningly.

Far away Plupy was skipping for pickerel in a likely reach of smooth water, bordered with green lily-pads. Suddenly a thought struck him that made him feel very sick. His jaw dropped, as did his fishpole with a splash.

"Whatcher doin' that for, scarin' my fish?" remonstrated Pewt.

"Gee-snicketty!" gasped Plupy; "what's become of our picnic party?"

"Gosh!" yelled Pewt, giving a convulsive start.

"Timenation!" shouted Beany, nearly falling out of the boat at the horror of the sudden recollection.

For a moment the three boys stood paralyzed with dismay, and then were galvanized to sudden action. They snatched their lines out of the water, not even stopping to unhook a flapping fish. Beany and Plupy grasped the oars, Pewt slammed himself into the stern seat and grasped the tiller lines. "Row like time, fellers," he urged, and away they went down the river leaving a wash of bubbles and a trail of swirls in the torn surface of the water. Pewt cut corners like the cockswain of a 'varsity eight and yelled encouragement to the rowers.

After ten minutes of furious straining Beany blew up. "Take my place, Pewt. I'm tuckered out," he gasped. Pewt squirmed into place so quickly that scarcely a stroke was lost as he swung into time with Plupy, and Beany seated himself, panting, in the stern and the purple began to fade out of his chubby countenance.

Then Plupy, after a few minutes more, exchanged with Beany. In this way they ran the boat at full speed until they reached the picnic grounds, spurting frantically at the home stretch to show the picnickers that they were doing their utmost for their guests.

Alas, the grounds were empty. They grounded the boat and staggered up the steep bank. The fire still smouldered, but the kettle was gone. So were the wraps, the cushions, and everything else belonging to the picnickers, except their elaborate lunch which was in the cuddy of the boat. The boys felt sick. Somewhere on the country road were a party of starving, furious, outraged Westerners, deserted by their guides, their boatmen, their pilots, and hunting for their employer. Perhaps before this they had found him.

Gosh! and again Gosh! Gee-snicketty! and likewise, By Time! There was but one thing to do, and that was to get there first. Down the bank they tumbled and into the boat, pushed off, and away they went at their best speed. Probably that boat never made the trip from the "Eddy" to the foot of South Street in quicker time. The boys were light, good oarsmen, knew the river, and were nerved to their utmost by their desperate need, and the old boat had a bone in its mouth for the entire distance.

When they arrived they sprang out, fastened the boat, and started, as fast as their exhausted condition would admit, for Simpson's store. Joy! they were in time. Simpson was dozing at the back of his store when their abrupt and hurried entrance awoke him. Breathlessly they told their story. How the Eminent Westerner had fairly driven them to go fishing. How they had obeyed, although they thought it was a queer thing for him to do. How he had told them not to come back until they had got a good string of fish, and how they had been obliged to go 'way up the river before they got a bite, and then they had to go farther up-river before they struck a good place, and when they did it took a good while to get enough fish so that he would n't be mad when they came back; and how they rowed back as soon as they got enough fish, to find the party gone without paying for the boat or them for their work. How they had cut wood and built a fire and got pine cones and brought water and worked like niggers for them.

Simpson was impressed with their story. He was indignant at the way in which they had been treated. For his part he had always been mighty suspicious of those beach people, and if they thought because he was a countryman they could hire his boat and leave without paying for it — well, he guessed not! he guessed not! — and to aid his guesswork he made use of stronger language. Just as soon as his clerk came back for supper he would see about it. How did the people come to Exeter? In a wagon drawn by a pair of blacks? Yes. Well, he had n't seen them go by unless they went through Bow and Clifford Streets. It would be just like them to do it. They were mean enough.

In their hearts the boys fervently hoped they had. They did not want to meet them. They dreaded an explanation that involved cross-examination. They preferred to make this an *ex-parte* case. And they were half dead with fatigue and hunger and wanted to go home. But Simpson would not have it. They must wait. And wait they did, for hours as it seemed to the boys. In reality about a half-hour, at the end of which up whirled a three-seated wagon drawn by a stylish pair and driven by the Eminent Westerner. The light of battle gleamed in Simpson's eye, as it did in the eye of the Eminent Westerner.

He leaped from the wagon and proceeded to curl Mr. Simpson's hair with one of the most ornate dressings-down that gentleman had ever received. He pictured the boys as unjailed scamps, as unhanged rogues. He fairly crumpled them up with his fiery eloquence.

Mr. Simpson's eyes lost their fire. He became deprecatory and then apologetic. He promised to suitably punish the boys and to properly amend his business methods. The Eminent Westerner became calmer. He and his party had just made a most satisfying repast at the boat-landing where they had found their lunch intact. He paid Simpson's bill, omitting any gratuity to the boys. Then he sprang to his team, flourished the whip, and was off. He would never come again. Never! Simpson knew that, and he turned menacingly to the boys. But too late, for as he turned, they shot out of the shop like rats escaping from a cage. He followed, but to no purpose. He was a plump citizen and was not fleet of foot. They were. He had been paid and had supped. They were not and had not. What was the use? What, indeed? and he let them go.

And what was the use of trying to do well when people would treat "fellers so mean"? demanded Plupy in some heat. He would never work again; nor would Pewt; nor would Beany. And to think that them Western people had "et" up all that dinner. It was tough! tough! And the boys were starving and their backs were "broke." Gosh!

III

THE FAILURE OF THE "BIL POASTERS" COMPANY

THE unfortunate ending of the boy's venture into journalism, while adding to their somewhat unsavory reputation, left them in a fairly prosperous condition. They had money in their purses, or rather pockets, and being of a highly convivial and fairly generous disposition were very popular with their boy and girl friends as long as their money lasted.

This was not long, however, for riches are ever prone to take wings, and nothing that the boys did in those days had any tendency to clip or shorten the growth of these wings, and very shortly and after a meteoric career of extravagance the boys found themselves "broke." More than this, their financial affairs were approaching a more serious crisis than they had ever faced.

The ease with which they had made their money, and the happy-go-lucky way they had spent it, had made them so careless and improvident in their expenditures that they had incurred a listed indebtedness of several dollars before they were brought to their senses by a stern demand for a cash payment.

Very much disturbed in their minds, they held a conference in the paint shop of Pewt's father, while that highly gifted artist was engaged in painting Fatty's barn a highly inflamed and hectic red.

"Gosh! fellers," said Plupy, trying a paint-brush against a much-smeared door, "suthin's gotter be done. I owe old Polly Colket eighty-six cents for juju paste 'n' taffy on a stick, 'n' old Si Smith mos' fifty cents for gooseberries 'n' cocoanuts 'n' striped candy, 'n' Charles Folsom twenty-five cents for five pipes. I dono' what in timenation to do. If father finds it out he'll larrup time outer me."

"I'm worse offen you," said Beany. "I hired a horse 'n' buggy of Major Blake 'n' it cost me two dollars. Then I owe old Si thirty cents, 'n' Hen Simpson fifty cents for his boat. The old man said he would shake my liver out if I ever ran up a bill anywhere. Hope the old man don't go into Major's hotel."

"Huh! you fellers ain't smart," said Pewt. "All I owe is just twenty-five cents. You hed oughter charged it to your big brother, like I did."

"I ain't got any big brother," said Plupy.

"I have," said Beany, "but I did n't dass to do that. Jim would ha' put a tin ear on me if I done anything like that."

"Well, my brother licks me, ennyway, and I gotter square up with him some way," opined Pewt; "when a feller gives another feller a bat on the head whenever he feels like it, the other feller has got to do somethin' more about it than makin' him fall into the swill-tub."

"Didjer make him do that?" asked Plupy, in delight.

"You bet," said Pewt; "'n' he went right in head first, 'n' got 'bout a quart of swill up each sleeve of his coat."

"Did he lick yer?" demanded Beany.

"Naw. I was n't there. Fatty Melcher was there 'n' Skinny Bruce, 'n' he licked Fatty 'n' rubbed swill all over Skinny's face 'n' down his neck. He thought they done it."

"Where were you?" asked Plupy, with glistening eyes.

"I was behind Moulton's barn peepin' through the lilac bushes. I tell you, it was fine to hear Fatty holler 'n' see Skinny spit. They both said they did n't put the tub there, but he would n't believe 'em."

"Well," said Plupy philosophically, "when a feller falls into a swill-tub, or hits his head against a door, or sits on a table 'n' somebody pulls up the end leaf, or sits on a tack, he has got to paste somebody right off in order to feel anywhere near right."

There was a pause for a moment while each boy grinned reminiscently; then depression settled down on the trio as the desperate condition of their affairs forced itself upon them.

"Well, fellers," said Plupy, at last, "whatjer goin' to do about it?"

"Lessee," said Beany; "can't we get a job washin' wagons for Major Blake or Levi Towle?"

"Naw," said Pewt; "they don't pay nothin'. They jest make you wash a wagon 'n' then they let you ride on a hack to the station, or take a horse round to the hotel. Th' ain't no money in that."

"'S past alewife time, too," sighed Plupy.

"What ifitis?" sneered Beany; "after you got soppin' wet 'n' p'r'aps got a crack over the head from somebody 'at hit you 'stid er the fish, you can't get nobody to buy the fish even for hens."

"Well, ennyway, it was fun to slosh round 'n' spatter the other fellers, 'n' if we did n't get anything out of the fish, we had fun pluggin' 'em at people. Do you remember the time that stewdcat [Academy student] came down with a stovepipe hat, — I had an ole lounder of an alewife 'n' I waited in the alley between Dan Ranlet's 'n' Josh Getchell's store. I could hear him comin' right along steppin' fast, 'n' then I saw his shadow ahead of him 'n' I swung that fish round my head 'n' let her ding jest as hard as I could, 'n' whadduyou think? Old Jerry Bragdon come along jest in time to get that old fish—*bang*—right in the ear. It was Jerry that came along stidder the stewdcat. It nearly knocked his old bald head off. I was so s'prised that I stood there like a lunatic until he saw me. Gosh! you had ought to 'a' heard him swear, 'n' chase me; but I got away that time, 'n' he went over to Comical Brown's mother 'n' told her that Com did it, 'n' she kep' him in the yard a week. I used to get Com mad after that by singin' 'The feller that looks like me.'

'Oh, would n't I like to catch him,
Wherever he may be;
Oh, would n't I give him particular fits,
That feller who looks like me.'"

And Plupy roared and doubled up like a gigantic daddylonglegs.

"Aw, come on now, fellers, lessee if we can think up any way to earn some dosh. If we don't think of somethin', we fellers has got to go to work," said Pewt.

"The gardens is all made 'n' it ain't time to dig potatoes or pick apples," said Beany.

"We might saw some wood," suggested Pewt doubtfully.

"I guess not much," said Plupy, with warmth. "I get enough of that at home, 'n' enough splittin', too. I'd rather go to jail than saw wood, ennyway."

"We might try to sell papers," said Beany.

"Not if I know myself," shouted Pewt and Plupy in unison; "we got enough of the paper business when we published 'The Lambaster.'"

"Anyhow, it was a good paper," said Beany; "'n' it would ha' went all right if the people had n't got mad; but now we 've gotter try somethin' else, I guess."

"Say, fellers," chimed in Beany, "didjer hear 'bout old Lem Tasker?"

"Aw! 'course I did! why doncher tell us somethin' new?" said Plupy, with scorn.

"Well, 'f you know so much, you better tell it," said Beany.

"He got sent to jail fer stealin'," asserted Plupy.

"Ho! Ho! stealin'," jeered Beany. "Plupy thought he knew it all; — stealin', huh!"

"Well, I know, ennyway," sneered Plupy, "I was only coddin' you."

"Well, if you know, tell us; just tell us, that's all; I stump yer!" shrieked Beany, snapping his fingers in Plupy's face.

"Aw, now, I can if I wanter," replied Plupy stubbornly.

"Stealin'! Ho! Ho!" said Beany. "Old Lem fell downstairs 'n' broke his alimentary canal."

"Haw! I guess I knew that 'fore you did," said Plupy. "Ennyway, it was n't his alimentary canal. Th' ain't no such thing."

"'T is, too," said Pewt; "that is a part of a feller, — one of the bones of his leg."

"Huh! bone of his grandmother," sneered Plupy; "call a bone a canal, — huh!"

"They call it a canal, because it is holler like a holler tree, that's why they call it a canal," said Beany; "ennyway, ole Lem Tasker fell downstairs 'n' broke his alimentary canal, 'n' I can back it up," said Beany belligerently.

"Who will they get to post bills now?" said Pewt thoughtfully.

"Gosh!" they all exclaimed, as one thought struck them, — "'less we do it."

This was providential; it almost seemed as if a special providence had interfered to ward off certain bankruptcy, exposure, disgrace, and worse yet, — for disgrace sat lightly upon them, — condign punishment.

In a moment they resolved themselves into a committee of the whole acting as a ways and means committee, and almost before a legislative body could have elected a chairman and have proceeded into executive session, the boys had laid many and far-sighted plans that bade fair to revolutionize the science of bill-posting. Pewt, who had inherited the paternal talent for sign-painting, was to prepare the company sign forthwith; Beany, whose father had reduced the art of paper-hanging and the manufacture of flour paste to a scientific practicality, was deputized to purloin or otherwise acquire from the paternal stock in trade a sufficient amount of paste to withstand any demand that the business might make; Plupy, whose father had once been a harness-maker and had added the gentle art of carriage-trimming to his repertoire, was commanded to appropriate several tack-hammers and a practically unlimited supply of tacks. Their headquarters was to be in Plupy's barn, the absence of his father in Boston during the daytime lending security both to the business venture and to the accumulation of the hardware.

These arrangements made, the boys bestirred themselves briskly, and by night the headquarters were in occupation, and this most lurid and descriptive sign held a commanding position on the side of the barn nearest the street: —

PURINTON, SHUTE AND WATSON
BIL POASTERS
BILS FOR SHOWS, CiRCUSES, OXiANS, WEDiNgS
FUNeraLS, BerTHS, DETHS & aLL OTHer
FESTiVVITise POASTED aT LOeST Prices
No Gob TWO LarGe & NONE TWO SmaL

It was evident that Pewt had concentrated his undeniable talent for composition and painting on this opus, and the result was doubly gratifying to the public and the partners, and particularly to the latter, as almost immediately old Mr. Elkins, the auctioneer, catching sight of the gaudy announcement, pulled up his old roan horse and came limping into the yard, and in a very short time had made a contract with the boys for the "poasting" of fifty auction bills and the distribution of several hundred flyers at a fairly remunerative price. So the boys started out with great enthusiasm, and in a very short time had defiled the face of nature with hideous notices of a public vendue, and had scattered handbills over the entire community.

The next day business was dull, as it was on the day following, and the spirits of the boys became correspondingly low. On the third day the advance agent of Morris Bros'. Minstrels came to town and promptly engaged the boys to assist in the distribution and publication of highly colored prints. For this, however, they received no money, but satisfactory credentials for admission to the hall, which delighted them beyond measure; for, as Plupy said, "if the feller had paid them in money they would have had to pay the men they owed, but as long as he gave them tickets, nobody could blame them for going to the show."

The day after this the Baptist Church issued notices for an oyster supper to which the public was invited upon a twenty-five cents per capita basis, and the services of the firm were solicited for the proper dissemination of the knowledge. But when, after spending the greater part of a day in distributing bills, during which Pewt had received a black eye in a fight with a Green-Street boy, on whose shed he had essayed to post a bill, Beany had been bitten by a dog on South Street which disputed his right to fire a tightly wadded bundle of bills in a window, and Plupy had had his ears soundly boxed by an irate lady whose baby he had awaked by hoarsely hawking the contents of the bills into her window, the boys were very indignant on learning that the only compensation they were to receive was in the shape of a limited whack at the refreshments, and they did not like oysters. A very acrimonious dispute with the committee in charge resulted in a cash compromise only when the boys declared they would go over their route again and tell everybody that the date had been changed.

And so for a few weeks, business was good. The firm worked faithfully in posting bills for sheriff's sales, real estate transactions, oyster suppers, notices that somebody's wife had left his bed and board and that somebody forbade the public from trusting her on his account and that somebody would not pay any bills of her contracting, or that somebody else had given his son or daughter his, her, or its time to act and trade for his, her, or itself, and that somebody would no longer pay any bills on his, her, or its account, and other important documents of a legal nature. In this way they gradually accumulated money enough to pay one hundred cents on a dollar to their creditors, and their financial future looked very bright. While money did not flow into their coffers in a stream, there was nevertheless a very gratifying trickle in their direction and they began to plan for substantial bank accounts.

At about this time the opportunity for a financial stroke occurred, that crisis when Fortune knocks at one's door, that happy tide in the affairs of men which, taken at its flood, leads on to victory: — a circus was to come to town.

At the time of the arrival of the advance agent the reputation of the boys for prompt and satisfactory work was so well established that it came to his ears, and he promptly called upon them and engaged their services; and the next day they had the inexpressible delight of riding around the town on the gayly painted advertising van and of assisting in the affixing of magnificent lithographs to barns, outbuildings, fences, and billboards, for which they received tickets to both afternoon and evening performances and a promise to lead or drive a pony in the parade.

In addition to this a special agreement was made by which a number of expecially fine lithographs were left with them to be posted the night before the great day, to appear to the dazzled eyes of the public on the morning of the parade. For these services the boys were to receive one dollar each, upon the condition that the pictures were to be posted in unusual and particularly appropriate places, where they would attract unusual attention from their unexpected positions. The agent's idea, which he carefully explained to the boys, was that the art of advertising was in attracting the attention of the public: that is to say, a picture of a hippopotamus as the Behemoth of Holy Writ would be more likely to attract attention if posted on some house of worship than on some barn or outbuilding, and he added several other fitting illustrations. The boys were very quick to comprehend his ideas and expressed their confidence in their ability to earn their money. And when the agent left town he made them sinfully proud by telling them they were about the gamest young sports he had ever met.

During the week or ten days before the arrival of the circus the boys conferred often and weightily in regard to the appropriateness of certain places to serve as billboards, and outlined a plan of activity that should fairly electrify the citizens and win them fame and their dollar each.

In the mean time they did not neglect their business, but executed what "Gobs" were given them, whether "larg or smal." In this way they turned many an honest penny, but nothing in the nature of a bonanza.

The prospect of a circus attracted much less interest among the citizens than usual on account of several matters of local interest which had transpired. The wife of a very prominent citizen had given birth to triplets; the different factions in the Baptist Church, known derisively as the "Hard Shells" and the "Soft Shells," were in the midst of a most desperate church fight which was to culminate in a meeting on the very night of the circus; the Congregational Church had dismissed its pastor and engaged a new man, an extremely fat and rather prosaic, not to say stupid, gentleman of enormous girth, immense weight, and a prodigious voice; the chairman of the Board of Selectmen had inadvertently set fire to his whiskers by the explosion of an oil lamp, and had not only damaged them seriously, but had scorched a curious and disfiguring twist into his countenance which made him the most ridiculous caricature ever imagined; serious trouble had arisen over the removal of several bodies from the old cemetery by the Trustees, who had been threatened with criminal prosecution by some of the relatives of the deceased; and the ordinarily quiet town was in a whirl of excitement. Naturally the acrid discussion of these matters had come to the notice of the members of the firm, who kept tally on whatever occurred in the little town of Exeter, and quite naturally sought to utilize it in whatever way might turn to their profit and convenience.

The night before the arrival of the circus was overcast, but in the season of full moon, so that, while light enough for the purpose of posting bills, it was dark enough to enable them to do it unperceived. Especially was this the case in the good little town, for the worthy citizens were addicted to early hours, and retired betimes, and as the firm had arranged matters so as to spend the greater part of the night in the open by the simple expedient of Beany obtaining permission of his parents to spend the night with Plupy, Pewt ditto with Beany, and Plupy likewise with Pewt, they prepared for a long and hard evening's work, and at about eleven o'clock, when the world was quietly sleeping, they silently stole forth, laden with lithographs, paste, and brushes, and did their deadly work.

What was the amusement, horror, delight, consternation, glee, and anger of the citizens, arising early to welcome the circus, to find front doors, bay windows, and immaculately painted walls of many of the houses thickly pasted with circus literature, and to see upon the walls of the warlike church edifice the legend in scarlet letters two feet long

CIRCUS TO-NIGHT!

COME ONE! COME ALL!

— to see upon the white painted cottage where dwelt the happy mother of the triplets a much more than life-size figure of a stork with the words —

THE SECRET OF AMERICAN PROSPERITY

On Exhibition in the Big Tent

— beneath which Pewt had neatly painted —

There is Luk in Od Numbers.

What was the anger of the new pastor of the First Congregational Church to find hermetically sealed to the front wall of the parsonage an immense parti-colored picture of an enormous slate-colored hippopotamus, with huge, gaping, cavernous jaws of vivid crimson and the words —

COME AND SEE

THE GIGANTIC HIPPOPOTAMUS

THE BEHEMOTH OF HOLY WRIT,

The Largest, the Fattest, the Most Colossal, and the Stupidest Quadruped in the Four Quarters of Earth's Grand Palladium.

COME AND HEAR HIM ROAR!

It would be dreadful to write down what the Chairman of the Board of Selectmen said when his horrified eyes fell on the immense picture of a freak, looking strangely like him and inscribed in lurid letters as

JO–JO, THE DOG–FACED MAN

A Cross between a Kaffir Woman and
the Huge Baboon or Man Monkey
of Central Africa

Displays an almost Human Intelligence

On Exhibition in the Big Tent.

To-night! To-night!

All come and come a-runnin'!

The Trustees of the Cemetery, all reputable and conservative citizens, broke a lifetime of wise conservatism in speech and manners when they lapsed into horrid profanity as their startled eyes gazed upon an immense hyena robbing a grave of its dead, and below, these explanatory words—

THE HIDEOUS LAUGHING HYENA,

THE GRAVE-ROBBER, WHICH BY STEALTH DESCENDS INTO THE GRAVEYARDS AT NIGHT AND RIFLES THEIR CONTENTS FOR ITS GRUESOME AND REVOLTING REPAST.

ON EXHIBITION IN THE BIG TENT.

TO-NIGHT! TO-NIGHT!

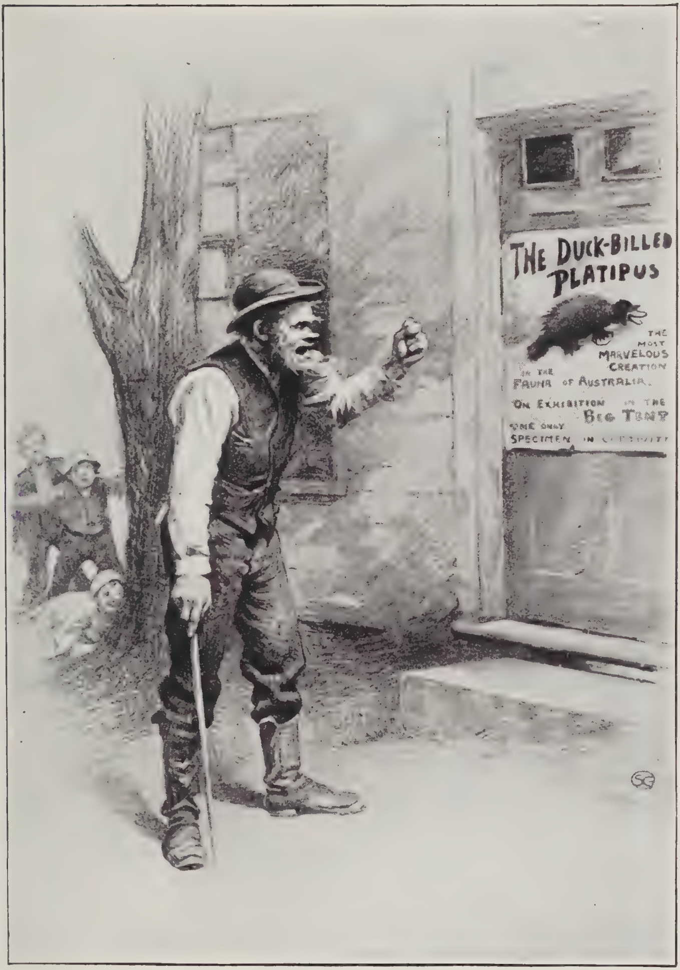
The deep and hearty maledictions of Mr. Simeon Flanders, an extremely hirsute gentleman with an enormous flat nose, were almost excusable, when his irate glances perceived upon his front door a picture of a shaggy animal with a broad flat beak heralded by letters of great size as

THE DUCK-BILLED PLATIPUS,

THE MOST MARVELOUS CREATION IN THE FAUNA OF AUSTRALIA.

ON EXHIBITION IN THE BIG TENT

THE ONLY SPECIMEN IN CAPTIVITY.


THE DUCK-BILLED PLATIPUS
THE MOST MARVELOUS CREATION
IN THE FAUNA OF AUSTRALIA.
ON EXHIBITION IN THE BIG TENT
THE ONLY SPECIMEN IN CAPTIVITY

THE HEARTY MALEDICTIONS OF MR. SIMEON FLANDERS

At once these outraged citizens declared war against the proprietor of the circus, and before the parade was in readiness the entire outfit was attached for libel in more than a dozen suits, and the proprietor, a muscular gentleman with an immense black mustache, was diplomatically endeavoring to settle the actions with complimentary tickets to the families of the plaintiffs. When the offending boys were brought into his presence, it required the united efforts of the sheriff and the entire police force to keep him from doing violence to them.

Poor boys. It was a bitter morning for them, and when, after the actions had been satisfactorily settled, and they from their confinement in their beds heard the blare of the band, the shrill trumpeting of the elephant, and the various sounds of the parade, and realized that they were out of it all, they were very bitter and unresigned.

The afternoon performance was crowded to the ring, owing to the success of the boys as advertising agents; and when at about seven o'clock the proprietor, driving a team of calico ponies, stopped and personally interviewed the parents of Plupy, Beany, and Pewt, and successfully secured their release from captivity, and took them in his own team to the big tent where they occupied reserved seats, they decided that the world was a pleasant place, after all.

But their fathers, fearing unexpected developments in the future, laid an embargo upon the business of the firm, which later passed into the hands of Old Lem Tasker, who had providentially and very miraculously recovered from the debility caused by the fracture of his "alimentary canal."

IV

PURVEYORS OF LITERATURE

In the days before the introduction of telephones, teleposts, Marconis, and other speed-limit violations, the medium for the dissemination of knowledge in the country town was the weekly paper.

To be sure, in the thriving village of Exeter, which owed no small part of its reputation to its sole newspaper, a large percentage of its reading public welcomed the weekly visits of the "Fireside Companion" and the "New York Ledger." "Godey's Lady's Book," which to the uninitiated served to present little beyond page after page of illustrations of underwear with descriptive literature of the same, had its quota of subscribers among the women and the proprietors of the dry-goods stores, — I had almost said "emporiums," but the word was not then in common use. A few citizens who wielded financial influence took a Boston paper, and discoursed weightily over its stock quotations and of matters of national importance.

But to the very large majority of its citizens, the Exeter "News Letter" was the Referee, the Umpire, the Arbiter Elegantiarum, the Literary

Oracle, the Compendium of Useful Knowledge, the Social Register, the Mrs. Grundy, the Court of Last Resort. Did a citizen desire to know the particular moment at which the tide turned, or the moon quartered or gibbered or did things that moons are supposed to do, it was to the "Column of Scientific Knowledge" of the "News Letter" that he turned, in preference to the "Old Farmers' Almanac."

Did a citizeness entertain grave doubts of the precise amount of allspice necessary to the perfect concoction of a pandowdy, the "Housewife's Receipt Department" furnished just the required information. Did a politician wish to nail a political lie or scarify a political opponent, it was to the "News Letter" he turned for proof positive of that politician's previous political utterances. Did a question arise as to the precise date of the birth of a child, the death of a person, a marriage, an elopement, the painting of a barn, the building of a house, the choking of a cow with an apple, the laying of an immense egg, the first crocus in spring or the last dandelion in the fall, the first skimming-over of the river or the departure of the ice, the advent of the bluebird or robin, the passage of wild geese, the extremes of heat and cold as recorded at the residence of our genial townsman Mr. Eli Perkins Blank, the advent of a two-headed calf, a chicken with four legs or a cat with two tails, proof of the same was at hand in the fertile and accurate columns of the "News Letter."

Then again the paper had cultivated a most courteous and felicitous style of heralding events that made its personals an unfailing delight. Was a child born in the family of Bill Ricketts, an event by no means uncommon, and of no particular importance to the public, that gifted paper made an epic of the occurrence by stating: "Our genial townsman, Mr. William Ricketts, Esq., and his fair helpmeet, Rehannah Apphia Ricketts, formerly the brilliant Miss Baggs, of Poplin Corner, were heart-gladdened by the arrival of a nine-pound visitor on Wednesday evening of this week, their seventeenth." As a result Bill, — I beg pardon, — Mr. William Ricketts, Esq., bought fifty papers and sent them, marked, to his friends.

Did Jake Caswell's wife's mother, the most cantankerous old frump in the county, arrive at Jake's modest dwelling and proceed to raise hob with its management and traditions, the "News Letter" took pains to announce that "Mrs. Vixanna Croper is spending the summer with her son-in-law, Mr. Jacob Caswell, our enterprising janitor of the town hall, and his estimable wife, who are deriving no small enjoyment from her sojourn."

Was there a funeral, a complete list of the donors of "floral tributes" was given, and any omission or error was duly corrected in the next publication, all of which called for heavy purchase of papers.

Indeed, so necessary was this remarkable paper to the people of the town and the surrounding villages, that Friday, the day of publication, came to be looked upon as a sort of half-holiday, in which business was practically suspended while the paper was being read and discussed.

To be sure, the editor sometimes overlooked errors, occasionally grotesque ones; as when, in his description of the wedding of a very well-known and well-loved young lady, he employed the word "dainty," with frightful results, as the compositor sent out the following: "Her dirty hands and feet were encased in white kid"; and hideous sounds of discord were the result. On another occasion, the paper spoke of an exceedingly plump lady as "jelly" instead of "jolly." But the errors were few.

The local delivery of the paper was accomplished by newsboys or carriers, who did not cry their wares, but "plugged" them into the doors and windows, or upon the piazzas and porches of the subscribers, and at the close of their routes collected a modest but fairly generous stipend from the proprietors. The distribution to out-of-town subscribers was by United States mail, and it was a stirring sight to see one of the proprietors with his gayly painted handcart piled high with folded and addressed papers bearing down on the local post-office.

Now Plupy, Beany, and Pewt had fortuitously succeeded to the job of carrying papers, vice three other town boys who had resigned their office on being detected in serious dereliction of duty. Indeed, their resignations had been handed in with such abruptness that they had escaped one of the irate proprietors only by the most marvelous feats of dodging, ducking, and shinning over fences.

The chase had been witnessed by the boys with the most sinful glee. As a sporting proposition it appealed to them, and their betting instincts favored the fugitives. As a spectacular pantomime, it keenly touched their sense of the ridiculous, and they slapped their legs and quite doubled themselves up in delight as they witnessed the frantic sprinting of the pursued, and the puffing, dogged pursuit of the avenger.

But apart from the amusement they derived from their artistic appreciation of the scene, their business instincts at once grasped the opportunity, and after giving the overheated proprietor an opportunity to cool down, they applied for the vacancy. Pewt acted as spokesman, for, though he was in some respects the toughest of the three, he had the faculty of looking as innocent as a white dove.

To Pewt's modest request the proprietor, Mr. Hall, made a hot response.

"Naw! I've got enough of you boys," he snarled.

"But, Mr. Hall," said Pewt, with convincing smoothness, "we fellers is all right. All we want is a chance to show you what we can do. Honest, now, we will do the job slick."

"Lessee!" snapped the proprietor; "what's your names?"

As the proprietor evidently did not know the boys, and was exceedingly near-sighted as well, Pewt glibly gave the names of three of the best-behaved boys in town, whom he and the other boys regarded as utter milksops and mamma's darlings, Johnnie Wilson, Arthur Hanson, and Willie Colcord, naturally concluding that the mention of their own names would lead to undesirable complications if not actual hostilities.

"Hum," mused the proprietor, scratching his chin thoughtfully; "that sounds better. Whenever I see three boys together, I generally conclude that they are that infernal Shute boy and his disreputable cronies, who everybody knows are the worst boys in town. If their parents were not so respectable, these boys would be in the reform school to-day. They ought to be in for life."

"Thasso, Mr. Hall," chimed in Plupy, "they is pretty bad fellers. Our folks would n't let us go with any such fellers as them, even if we wanted to, which we don't," he concluded hastily.

"They would n't be quite so bad if it warn't for Pewt Purinton," added Beany; "Pewt is the worst feller I ever see."

"Huh! I betyer on that," said Pewt quickly, with heightened color. "Beany Watson is worse than Pewt, 'n' Plupy Shute is as bad as Beany 'n' worse, too. Pewt was all right before he went with Beany and Plupy."

"Well, I guess, you old —" began Plupy, with an injured expression, when he was cut short by the proprietor who said, "Never mind that gang of rowdies. I'll give you a list of subscribers and your instructions." And he produced three route-lists and explained carefully the duties of the position, laying especial stress upon speed, promptness, accuracy, and courtesy. He charged them to be careful to put the papers in sheltered places in wet or windy weather, and to be civil and polite to subscribers, who sometimes were a bit unreasonable.

The boys promised faithfully, Pewt informing him that they were always polite and wellbehaved, "Ain't we, Arthur? Ain't we, Willie?" he asked of Plupy and Beany, who vociferated, "'Course we are, Johnnie," as they bade a polite good-bye to Mr. Hall and hurried around the corner to exult with unholy joy over the audacious impersonation of Johnnie, Arthur, and Willie.

They nearly came to blows, however, over the division of the routes, a difficulty which Pewt solved in this ingenious manner. As the downtown route was by far the easiest and most interesting of the three, he tactfully suggested that Plupy and Beany toss up, best three in five, for the choice of the Plains and over-the-river route, and the length of the proceedings while the young gamblers were spitting for good luck and making use of strange cabalistic signs to influence chance so stimulated their interest that when Beany won and chose the river route, Plupy like a good boy took the Plains route without grumbling, leaving the downtown route for Pewt as a matter of course, neither of the two realizing that Pewt got the best route without the hazard of a toss-up.

The next Friday, Johnnie, Arthur, and Willie appeared betimes at the office of the paper, received their copies, distributed them and received their pay with mutual satisfaction to employer and employees, and for several weeks this state of affairs continued without any complaint of a serious nature. Occasionally a paper was misdelivered, but as a rule their services gave complete satisfaction.

In an evil hour, however, the boys found out that their predecessors had been paid nearly twice as much as they were receiving. This led to an indignation meeting, at which and after due consideration it was agreed to go on a strike, and with diabolical wisdom the strike was scheduled to be declared on Friday morning at six-thirty, the usual hour for the delivery of the papers.

Little did the good citizens of the town realize, as they sought their well-earned rest in customary obedience to the nine o'clock curfew as it pealed forth from the old church-tower, the disappointment and the loss they would experience in the event that capital, in the persons of Smith, Hall and Clark, editors, proprietors, foremen, and compositors of the "News Letter," should fail to comply with the righteous demands of labor in the guise of Johnnie, Arthur, and Willie.

At six-thirty the mine was sprung. Beany, who was to be spokesman, lost heart at the last moment, and Pewt was forced to break the news to the firm. The meeting was short but full of action, as Mr. Hall promptly adopted the tactics he had employed on a former occasion, and pursued the fleeing boys far up Center Street, and with rather better success, for he got in one lick at Beany that stimulated that plump youth to a marvelous burst of speed, and further retained as spoils of war a paper collar, so narrow had been Plupy's escape.

Having shaken off their pursuer, they gathered to discuss the matter. The boys felt some discomfiture over the unceremonious termination of their engagement, and especially did Plupy and Beany manifest a disposition to arraign Pewt for his lack of business foresight and acumen.

"Now, jus' see whatcher done, Pewt. You've lost us a good job for nothin'."

"That's just the way with Pewt," said Beany, in injured tones. "He's never satisfied 'thout kickin' everything over."

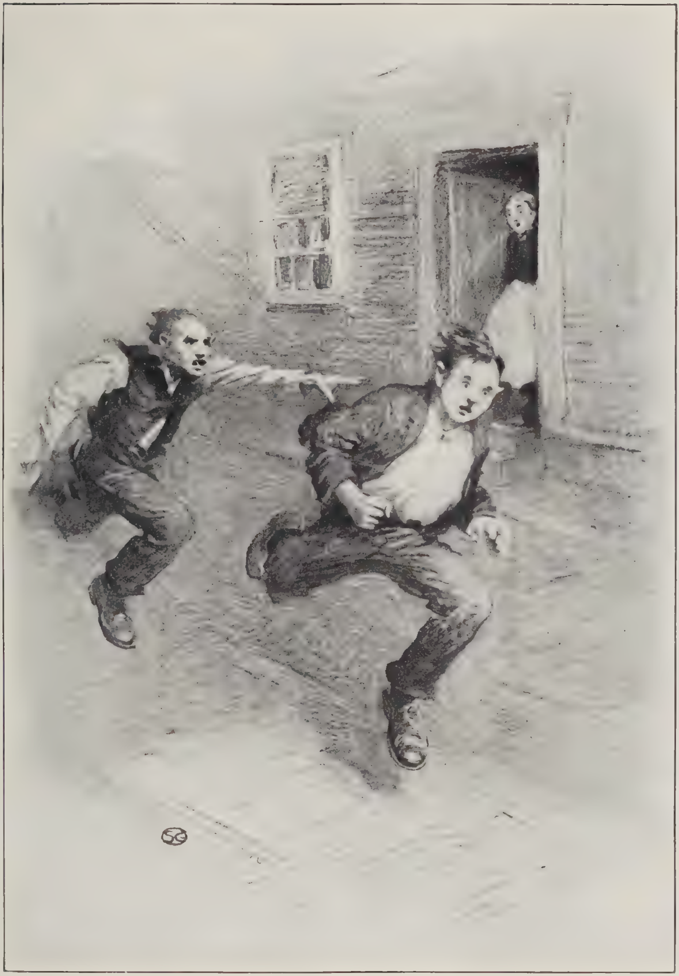
"Whatchew fellers howlin' 'bout?" demanded Pewt sturdily. "You both wuz just as anxious as I wuz to strike."

"Who tho't of it first? say I," cried Plupy.

"Thasso, Pewt, who tho't of it first? 'T warn't me, 'n' 't warn't Plupy," added Beany, in shrill tones of remonstrance.

"'Course you did n't," said Pewt, spitting through his teeth in disgust. "Such numheads as you fellers never could think up anything 'thout help."

"I druther be a numhead than a darn fool," sneered Beany.



A MARVELOUS BURST OF SPEED

"Somebody's goin' to git a punch in the ear, or a lam in the snoot," predicted Pewt darkly.

"Oh, shet up, fellers," said Plupy; "les' find out what's best to do, 'thout jawin' 'bout it. Come, Pewt, whatcher goin' to do 'bout it?"

"Wall, fellers," said Pewt, in a more conciliatory tone, "I don't believe old Hall can get along without us. When he sees he can't deliver his papers, he will ask us to take our jobs again, 'n' pay us 'most anything to git us. That's the way with strikes."

"What if they hire some other fellers?" queried Beany.

"Oh, that's easy," said Pewt; "we can get some pickets 'n' beat 'em that way."

"Gosh!" said Plupy; "we must take the nails out, for you can hit an almighty lick with a picket."

"Where'll we get the pickets? — pull 'em offen fences?" demanded Beany.

"Yah," scoffed Pewt; "don't you fellers know anything? Pickets off'er fence. Ho! Ho! Why, pickets is fellers to watch round 'n' keep other fellers from trying' to get our jobs."

"What if they get it?" asked Plupy.

"Why, foller 'em up 'n' lam 'em," replied Pewt truculently.

"S'posen they is fellers which can lick us?" said Plupy doubtfully.

"We can hook their papers, 'n' plug things at 'em 'n' do lots of things to 'em," replied Pewt confidently.

So the boys, with the optimism of youth, made the best of it and calmly awaited developments. They were jubilant when they learned that one of the compositors had taken one route and two of the proprietors the other two, and they confidently opined that capital would be on its knees ere another week.

The next Friday they were on the watch at six-thirty, but saw no evidence of delivery. So to while away time, they walked up the street a short distance, and to their surprise and indignation saw a student of the Academy, a "stewdcat" as they termed him, loping along delivering papers with the accuracy of an old hand.

The eyes of the boys fairly bulged out at the sight. That an old "stewdcat" should do the work was beyond words.

"Gosh!" hissed Pewt, "le's lam time outer him!"

With this desperate intention, they cut through Towle's stableyard as they saw him turn into Elm Street, and headed him off opposite the Unitarian Church. As they bore down on him with threats, he faced round and placed his papers on the ground behind him. He was a young fellow, perhaps two years older than the boys, rather larger and taller, and with a very frank and pleasant face with a determined look.

Seeing that the boys meant business, he prepared for war, which was not long in being declared, for Pewt, getting behind Plupy, gave that lank youth a violent push which sent him flying into the enemy's camp with his arms flailing the air like windmills.

Rapidly as he went in, he came out still more rapidly, with a bloody nose and a look of blended mystification and emotion on his countenance. As he went over on his back, all spraddled out like a frog, Pewt, who had endeavored to get in under the student's guard, received a swinging blow under the ear, which he afterwards admitted to be a "linger," and quit the field of battle promptly, and just behind Beany, who escaped unscathed.

The student then picked up his papers and walked off, deaf to their invitation to come back and try it again. While Plupy stanched his bleeding nose and told what he would have done if Pewt had n't pushed him, the boys laid wise plans to make the carrier sick of his job.

As a majority of the citizens did not rise until after the delivery of the papers, a good opportunity was offered the boys. So the next Friday they were on hand with a paper or two of tacks and a hammer, and, keeping far enough behind the carrier to avoid observation, they firmly tacked down to the front steps and porches the papers of those late risers whose habits were well known to the boys. The result was that when each citizen came out and hurriedly picked up his paper, he inevitably tore it in shreds, and during the day complained hotly to the proper parties.

The Friday following, the boys took another route, and having prepared a quantity of flour paste, glued a great many of the papers together, so that to separate the pages was an impossibility. During this day, the complaints at the office were so many that the proprietors were at their wits' end, and had their presses and machinery thoroughly overhauled to prevent a repetition of too great a flow of ink.

The third Friday came and the boys had another surprise for the proprietors and the public. Behind the "News Letter" office was a shed which was used for storing piles of old "News Letters" to await the arrival of the ragman. Thursday night the boys procured a supply of these dead papers, with great good luck finding a complete supply of those of the same day and month of a year or two back, and the next morning, following the carrier as before, took away the papers he left and substituted for them the dead papers of a year before.

This time the subscribers, who had been completely fooled into reading, with increasing bewilderment, these old papers, stormed the office in force and demanded the blood of the bewildered proprietors. An investigation was at once set on foot. The student was summoned and detailed the trouble he had had with the three carriers whose places he took.

This let a flood of light upon the proprietors. It was that miserable Johnnie Wilson, that rascally Arthur Hanson, that villainous and abandoned Willie Colcord. Talk of Plupy, Beany, and Pewt, they were Methodist Sunday-School boys in comparison with these execrable villains.

So leaving the proper settlement of the matter in their hands, the complainants departed, and the three proprietors descended upon the peaceful and unsuspecting families of Johnnie, Arthur, and Willie. The mothers of these three boys brought them, trembling, from school. They weepingly denied the accusation and were denounced as liars and villains by the indignant proprietors. The fond mothers took up cudgels for their offspring. The fathers were sent for and came home raging, and threw the proprietors from the premises with much blasphemy. The entire neighborhood was stirred to its depths. The proprietors threatened prosecution for malicious mischief. The parents threatened suits for defamation of character and trespass.

Finally a man arrived who said he had seen the carriers nearly every morning, and he never remembered to have seen these boys. Another chimed in to the same effect; then another. Then the whole thing came out. The culprits were none other than that infernal Shute boy, that miserable Purinton boy, and that wretched Watson boy. Search was made for them, and they were apprehended and identified by the carrier as the three who had stopped him on his route and whom he had licked.

Then their fathers were summoned. Poor Plupy, Beany, and Pewt. Their fathers were just and upright men, who had suffered much from their sons' misdeeds, and who had each forbidden his respective son from associating with the other two under the most severe penalties.

It was time, they agreed, that vigorous measures should be taken. They meant it. The proprietors saw that they meant it. They expressed a desire that justice might be meted out to the culprits. They were given the most solemn assurances that it should be. It was. There was in the minds of the boys no lingering doubt of its completeness.

V

THE BOYS BECOME A COMMITTEE ON VILLAGE PURIFICATION

Towards the closing of the long vacation and the opening of the fall term, the town stores began to show signs of life. These stores were in a measure like unto the dandelion. In the spring it blossomed like a rose, although of decidedly different flavor and color. Then, as the summer days came, it withered and died, choked by the intense heat and dust. In the fall, with the return of cooler weather and fall rains, it blossomed again, but with a tougher, harder, more fibrous stem, and with blossoms of a rather more parsimonious nature as to color and softness of petal.

So the village storekeepers, in bright anticipation of the brisk fall trade with the return of the several hundred students of the Academy and Seminary and of such of the citizens of the town who deemed themselves fortunate enough to have cottages at the beaches or indulgent relatives in other towns and cities, laid in a very complete stock of pens, paper, slate pencils with gilt paper tastefully adhering thereto; cedar lead pencils that smelled deliciously of the wood; red bananas, now unhappily almost obsolete; Jessup's Candy of delightful memory, which nothing in the line of present-day confections can equal in delicacy of taste and odor; cream candy that adhered in rich blobs to one's fingers and prolonged the unctuous feast; striped stick candy, a most enduring sweet; cream-cakes; fishing-tackle, dusted and turned over in the box; minny hooks, butterfly nets (some of the brightest colored butterflies come in September and October), popguns, squirt-guns, "Beadle's Dime Novels," sling-shots, "Police Gazettes," rubber footballs, blown and unblown, baseballs, very uneven in shape, harder than brickbats, and with bas-relief seams that infallibly raised elongated blood-blisters on the hands of any boy that caught them; bouquets of artificial flowers that nourished in their wicked bosoms a blunt, flinty knob which, when worked by a strong spring, would give the innocent person smelling the flowers a most unchristian thump on the nose; blow-guns for beans, peas, or small pieces of putty; and other articles of household need.

Naturally the lack of ready money to purchase some of these articles, which to the boys were the practical necessities of life, wore on their usually buoyant spirits and made them for a time thoughtful, at least more so than usual. They had tried running a newspaper, and after succeeding gloriously had failed ingloriously. They had essayed bill-posting, and had had victory snatched from their grasp just as their eager hands had almost secured a strangle-hold on elusive prosperity. They had plunged boldly into the glittering generalities of paper-carrying and had narrowly escaped jail. And they were practically bankrupt: they who had displayed originality, industry, and ambition, and had pursued that fitful jade, Opportunity, whenever she lightly crossed their path, and dropping her handkerchief, fled, looking backward.

It was not that they were lazy, for they were not: that is, Beany and Pewt were alive from head to foot, brimming over with activity and restless industry. Plupy, by reason of his phenomenal growth and lankiness, was physically somewhat inert and lethargic, but had ideas. So had the other two, more than they knew what to do with. The three made a powerful combination. Would opportunity come again? They would wait, they would be patient, they would think, and with them thought meant the incubation of action.

It chanced that one Deacon Stebbins, who lived on the Hemlock Side, had become inoculated with the ambition to raise pigs on a large scale for the local market, and had established a somewhat ornate, highly flavored, and extensive piggery on what was known as Jady Hill. A long, low building had been erected, subdivided into small inclosures with yards in which some scores of pigs of all sizes were confined, and there reproduced their kind with amazing fertility.

Indeed, they multiplied so much faster than they matured, and matured so much faster than there was a demand for them, that the good deacon was put to his wits' end to provide food, drink, and shelter. The deacon had a few cows, and had been misled by the statements made in the agricultural column of the local paper to the effect that an inconceivably large number of pigs could be readily raised, kept, and fattened by the skim milk from a preposterously small number of cows.

But once in, the deacon was game, and did not propose to have his profits taken away by a too premature sacrifice of his stock. So he was forced to cast about for something to eke out the supply of skim milk or to allow his pigs to starve to death and himself to suffer the penalties prescribed for those who, "Having the charge and custody of cattle, horses, sheep, swine, or other domestic animals, shall deprive the same of necessary sustenance or shelter, or shall knowingly and willfully permit the same to be so deprived"; and especially as the penalties included the forfeiture of the animals, the separation of the guilty party from his accumulation of gold, silver, and negotiable securities by the imposition of heavy fines, and his probable incarceration in the county jail for a very considerable period.

The deacon found, after diligent inquiry, that the cheapest of foodstuffs for the support and sustenance of his pigs was that by-product of the domestic table known as swill, which could ordinarily be obtained at the nominal price of going after it. There was, however, another and very subtle element that entered into the composition of this by-product. Swill, as it was then termed, waste, as it is now more delicately spoken of, consisted of the odds and ends of food that could not be used in composition with other articles as a side dish or a serve-over. It was made up of potato- and apple-parings, stale bread, pieces of burned toast or crust, sour milk that had stood too long unscreened and had become fly-infected, coffee- and tea-grounds, soggy bread that had not risen to the occasion, pale, inert, and lifeless beans that had not come up to the standard set by the thrifty housewife, together with the countless mistakes made by the daughters of the house who were being taught cookery by their accomplished mammas.

In those days the enlightening pages of that delightful school classic known as Physiology and Hygiene taught us that the stomach of the pig was analogous to that of the human being in size, shape, and digestive power. While we are willing at this day to concede the two former attributes, for we all have seen many people with stomachs that strongly resembled the stomachs of fat hogs, and whose appetites and manner of eating called to mind healthy and enthusiastic specimens of these animals, we cannot agree with the author's views on the question of digestion. He certainly must have meant ostriches, for the soggy messes daily dealt out to these animals could not, I believe, have been digested by any human stomach.

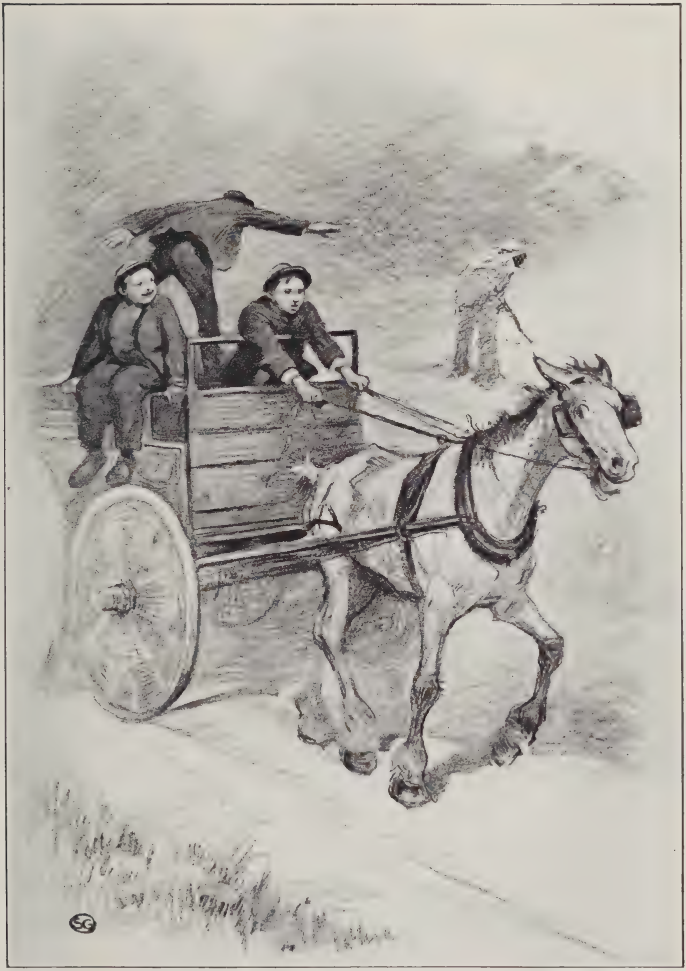
In the rear of or at the side of every well-ordered house of that period stood a barrel and two pails, or tubs, generally butter firkins that had passed their usefulness as such. In the barrel were carefully placed the wood ashes from the house stoves. In one of the firkins was placed with equal care the grease and fat that was no longer of any use in the family circle. In the other firkin was carelessly thrown the waste from the table. The first two receptacles were emptied about once a month when the soapfat man, clad in his dusty blue frock and high greasy boots, drove up in his cart, and exchanged for the ashes and fat a wooden measure of soft soap, a jelly-like, clean-smelling composition of the color of a deeply ripe horse-chestnut, and which was kept in a small blue tub in the woodshed and ladled out with a half-cocoanut. To have used anything else would have savored of treason. This soft soap was a powerful cleanser and disinfectant and could clean a boy's grimy hands, neck, and ears and cruelly sting the raw places thereon more thoroughly than any other substance, except perhaps the turning-lathe or the spokeshave.

The waste tub was supposed to be emptied every second day by some boy whose family owned and cherished a pig, and who lived too far from the compact part of the town to be menaced by the authorities.

Now, through the carelessness of the housewife, the immature daughters, or the hired help, strange articles and ingredients foreign to the composition of edible waste occasionally came to light, often too late to save the life of valuable swine. Such were broken lamp-chimneys, bottles, crockery-cups and plates, shreds of wall-paper, bits of lamp-wicking, a baby's shoe or odd sock, jewelry of various kinds, stove-pokers, an occasional set of false teeth, spectacles, — both "nigh tos" and "fur offs," — soot from stovepipes, tin cans, pieces of broken bric-à-brac, and small articles from the what-not in the best room.

The worthy deacon from somewhat bitter experience was aware of this and was accustomed with eyes, nose, and deft fingers to scrutinize, scent out, and pluck out these deleterious substances before serving meals to his charges. This naturally took a good deal of time, although the deacon had developed remarkable skill. He would form a seething mass of provender over a chute of gentle slope and deftly remove all innutritious substances with unerring instinct. Still, there were times when an entire tub had to be condemned, as when the servant girl had cleaned the lamps and emptied the contents into the tub. The condemned material was piled in a huge and ever-increasing heap near the buildings and became a hideous mound of decomposition, smelling to heaven.

As the deacon's stock increased, he found it impossible to assemble and properly sort out his supplies alone, and so an opportunity was afforded the boys, who occasionally visited the place for the purpose of indulging in the pleasures of the chase, when, as occasionally happened, some of the younger animals broke jail, to enter into the fragrant pursuit of collecting waste. The business rather appealed to the boys, on the unexplained instinct that prompts a small boy to wade through mud when he has on his best clothes. It afforded them an opportunity to travel, inasmuch as the medium for collecting and transporting the supplies was a nondescript sort of coffin-like cart drawn by an exceedingly



IT AFFORDED THEM AN OPPORTUNITY TO TRAVEL

aged and bony horse, with one eye and an artificially bobbed tail which had been shortened by machinery to an all but rabbit-like appendage on account of the animal being known as a tail-hugger: that is, whenever the rein got under the animal's tail, that tail would clamp down over the rein with a viselike grip and the animal would either bolt or kick and frequently did both. Of course, the extreme brevity of its tail made it rather difficult for the vicious old crowbait to catch the reins, but it was always hopeful and constantly switched its stub tail in the effort.

To prevent this the wily and experienced deacon had built a high rail over the dashboard of his cart over which the reins passed and were out of danger, provided due care was exercised to prevent them from sagging sufficiently to bring them within the danger zone or infected district. The extreme age of the beast would naturally be supposed to have abated its vicious desire to start things, but as a matter of fact it apparently had no effect in deadening its ambition, and ever hopeful, it switched and switched in vain.

It might well be supposed that the parents of Plupy, Beany, and Pewt would have objected strenuously to their sons' embarking in such a sphere of usefulness, but they were not consulted in the matter. The mothers of these three boys were famous housekeepers, whose duties kept them busy at home. Their fathers were also busy men, and as long as the boys filled the woodbox, split the kindlings, were on hand with fair regularity at their meals, were present and accounted for evenings, and were not publicly accused of any overt act of sedition by the legally constituted authorities, their time during the long vacation was their own. And so, conscious of this leniency on the part of their parents, they performed their household chores with praiseworthy diligence.

There was, of course, the usual dispute between them as to who should drive, who should lug, and who should pour in, and when this was satisfactorily settled, there was a further dispute as to "whether a feller could be expected to pour out a lot of slops without spatterin' any." Again, there was trouble when each one sought the privilege of "pasting" an innocent passer-by with a tempting potato or ripe and squashy tomato floating on the surface of the load. And as this practice brought hostilities and reprisals on the part of the justly indignant victims, their progress along certain streets became a general engagement all along the line, in which the air was thick with projectiles of varied nature and degree of offensiveness and harder missiles of offense which stimulated the old horse to unexpected speed. On one occasion this ancient animal started with such suddenness that Plupy went over backwards into the half-liquid contents of the cart with a prodigious splash and frightful results. Indeed, before this young man could go home he was compelled to go in swimming in his clothes, and, having thoroughly washed them, to dry them in the hot August sun and reappear at the supper-table with clean but very much wrinkled and somewhat shrunken garments.

But these very mishaps increased the joy of living to these boys. When Plupy emerged from his unexpected bath, Beany and Pewt nearly died with mirth. When Beany, during brick warfare with the denizens of South Street, peeped over the edge of the cart just in time to receive a yellow cucumber full in the face, Plupy and Pewt went into convulsions of laughter; and when Pewt, staggering under a heavy pail of refuse, tripped and fell with his load the whole length of Porter Robinson's flight of steps, scattering by-products all over the street, Plupy and Beany thought life held nothing more delightful for them.

Then again they were welcome visitors. Neat housewives were always glad to have their waste removed, and many a cooky, many an apple or pear, even an occasional two- or three-cent piece came to their eager hands. An occasional small job in the line of removing crockery, tin cans, and other refuse (but not edible) matter came to them, and was duly worked out with the aid of the deacon's outfit, but to their own profit. These little opportunities were treated by the boys as lucky business ventures, and as the word "graft," coined by Josiah Flynt, was then unknown, the use of the deacon's rolling stock and motive power to advance their interests, seemed to them an extremely proper thing, as long as they did not jeopardize his interests or delay their collections.

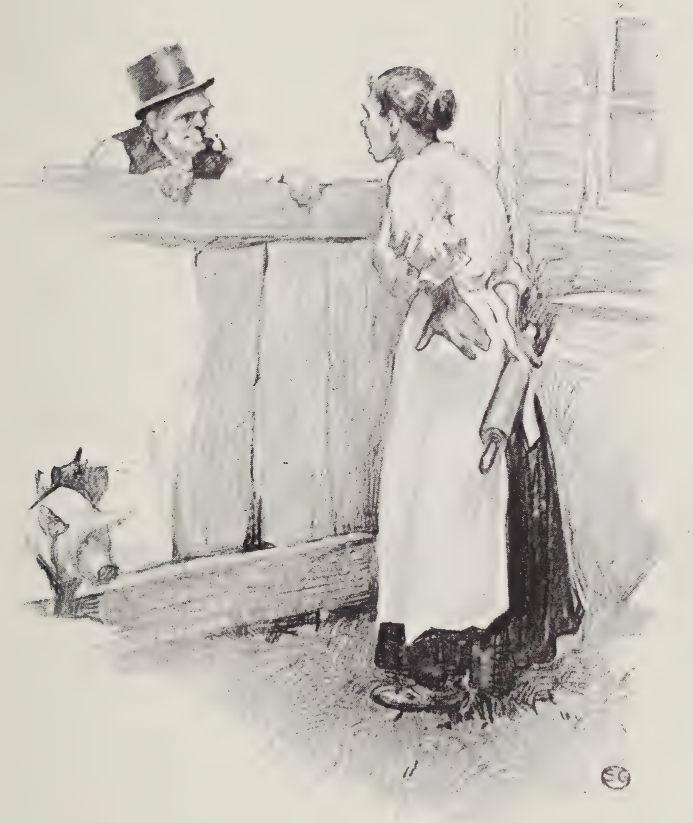
And so by thrift, industry, courtesy, and strict attention to business they, to use a current expression in the "News Letter," "merited a continuance of the public patronage." Their income from these small jobs, added to the small but prompt payments of their employer, who was well satisfied with their work, put them in exceedingly flourishing circumstances. Fortune was greeting them with a wide smile, and they were correspondingly elated and somewhat chesty over it. It had not always been easy work, for at times they had been put to straits in explaining to their parents why they smelled so and where for mercy sakes they had been, and their excuses had been marvels of ingenuity and injured innocence.

They had purchased largely at the stores and were the proud owners of a joint and several football, a sling-shot apiece, which were potent weapons of defense on embattled streets and of offense on hitherto peaceful ones. Plupy had purchased a pair of white mice which he carried in his pockets with twine, nails, chewing-gum, and other plunder. He had also invested in a parti-colored bantam rooster, so phenomenally aged that its comb and wattles were of a deep purple color, its spurs so long that it could not walk without falling down, and its crowing voice the merest gasping pipe. Yet in Plupy's eyes it was a thing of beauty.

Pewt had thrown prudence to the winds and had bought a set of oil paints on the installment plan; while Beany, true to his instincts as a dressy man, had bought a checked green-and-white bosomed shirt thickly speckled with small yellow flowers, and further embellished with pink cuffs and collar. He had also invested in a box of reversible paper collars for occasional wear at important functions, such as church sociables and picnics, short trips to the beach, the visits of and to relatives, and similar occasions of weight. They began again to take upon themselves airs of importance, although they said very little about the source of their prosperity, and each boy had purchased a cheap bottle of the loudest and most far-reaching cologne, with which they endeavored to neutralize the penetrating odor from their business, which would have caused them some embarrassment in social circles.

The life history of all great men is full of vain endeavors, trials, troubles, tribulations, temptations, discouragements, blind alleys and no-thoroughfares in their path to greatness. Few if any have had the path to success smooth and without obstacles. Ambition if worthy of the name is made more ardent by obstacles. Let us hope it was so in the case of these boys, for seldom if ever were single-hearted efforts for success so mocked at by unkind fate. They needed all their fortitude, all their cheerfulness, all their optimism; for Nemesis, with a bludgeon studded with jagged nails, was just ahead of them, lying in wait for their close-clipped and sun-bleached heads.

A move of reform in the line of sanitation had swept over the town. It began by the prosecution of one Barney McCrillis charged with maintaining a nuisance in keeping pigs in a most unsightly sty under the kitchen windows of his neighbor, Widow Margaret Doherty, a very outspoken Irish lady, known to the public generally as "Wild Mag." Trouble had arisen between Barney and the forceful Margaret over the relative fighting ability of her cat and Barney's black-and-tan terrier, and Margaret, to avenge the death of her pet, brought an action against



BARNEY AND THE FORCEFUL MARGARET

Barney for maintaining a nuisance and haled him before Justice Hunnewell. The Court took a view of the premises, heard the evidence, and promptly convicted Barney and banished the pig. Thereupon Barney, resolving deeply in his mind that if he could n't "kape a pig, divil if ony other mon shud," haled Margaret's half-brother into court on a similar charge. In this trial Barney's attorney, the Honorable W. W. Stickney, summoned Dr. William Perry, who testified that in his opinion late cases of typhoid which threatened to be epidemic owed their origin to unsanitary pigpens, sink-drains, and other similar nuisances.

Then the people awakened; public meetings were held. The keepers of pigs loudly maintained that any interference with their vested and inalienable rights was in direct violation of the constitution, "B'goshamity!" Those who maintained lawns and gardens joined the issue, and aided by the better element won the day and banished the pigs from the compact part of the town. It was at the conclusion of this controversy that the deacon, owning land on Jady Hill, undertook the industry that was supplying the boys with pocket-money.

But reform, once started, does not always stop at the point aimed at by its instigators. As soon as the pigs were banished, the slaughter-houses were attacked. There were several of these places that had been doing business since the recollection of the oldest inhabitant. The owners were indignant and engaged eminent counsel.

The counsel, holding respectable handkerchiefs to their respectable and respective noses, examined the buildings and declared everything clean and shipshape and advised their clients to fight it to the last ditch. The counsel for the petitioners tried to examine the premises and were driven out with blasphemy by the owners. An injunction was asked for, witnesses were summoned, legal fireworks were exploded, forensic oratory poured forth, and — the injunction made permanent. This did the business for the slaughter-houses.

But the deacon, not maintaining a slaughter-house and not keeping pigs in the compact part of the town, kept on his way rejoicing, added largely to his stock by natural increment, and daily increased his mound of innutritious but highly flavored refuse.

Murmurs began to arise. The Honorable Agent of the Cotton Mills whose house was a half-mile to the south of the piggery, held a field day or lawn party for the Upper Church parishioners on his spacious grounds one day in honor of the Foreign Missionary from Babelmandeb, the Reverend Thankful Whittaker, and the wind blew from the north and tempered the August heat with delicious coolness and the most terrific stenches from the piggery and its attendant mound, and drove the people to take refuge indoors.

Several people had remonstrated with the deacon for collecting waste by day, and had roundly denounced the boys for unskillful handling of the same; but the deacon, secure in the immunity of the text of the decisions, went his way unterrified. But although a most obstinate old gentleman, he realized that unskillful handling by the boys meant waste of good material, and he remonstrated with the boys with senile vehemence.

Once give a dog, a man, a woman, or a business a bad name, and it seldom becomes better. And so the deacon's business began to lose caste in the minds of the populace, and the Mill Agent's experience resulted in a petition to the Superior Court for an injunction. Under this petition a notice of fourteen days to the deacon was a prerequisite to a trial upon the merits, and the deacon, while feeling quite sure of the outcome, nevertheless took pains to cover his mound with dry earth, to clean and disinfect his buildings, and to collect his supplies by night in preparation for the view of the premises by the Honorable Court.

The night before the hearing the Honorable Court arrived and took lodgings at the Squamscott. That evening there was a reception given a native of the town, returning as a dignitary from foreign parts, in whom the town took great pride. It was a function of importance at the house of the late Honorable Ezekiel Blank, on Front Street. Great preparations had been made for the entertainment of the distinguished guests, among whom was included the Honorable Court, who had been prevailed upon to lend dignity to the function by his learned and urbane presence. The grounds were hung with Chinese lanterns; local musicians were blowing themselves black in the face on various instruments of wood and brass, and sawing diminished sevenths on strings; refreshments were being served by beautiful young ladies in white; hacks were being driven to the gate and were discharging loads of ladies in tilters and mantillas, who pointed their toes and minced gracefully on the arms of their blue-coated and nankeen-trousered escorts; when the boys, passing by on their cart loaded to the gunwale with fragrant waste, were attracted to the place by the lights, the music, and the cheerful bustle.

"Gosh," quoth Plupy, "hear the orchestra! ain't that bully? I know that tune, it's the 'Red Stocking Quickstep'; hi! hear that cornet, —

ta-te-ta-te"; and he struck into the theme with vigor.

"Aw, shut up, can't ye," snarled Pewt; "how can we hear anything with your yawpin' like that."

"Lessee if we can't drive nearer," said Beany.

So they turned the horse into the entrance by the house of the Honorable James Bell, and threaded their way between the more stately vehicles in spite of haughty stare and smothered imprecation.

As they obtained a commanding position near a raised platform, the orchestra struck up "Hail to the Chief," and from the front door, amid the acclaim of the populace within and the ohs and ahs of the peasantry without, came an imposing procession, headed by the honored Principal of the Academy, Dr. Soule, the returned Dignity from Foreign Shores, the Honorable Court, and the gracious hostess, followed by various distinguished citizens in pairs, and took seats on the platform. The orchestra ceased, and arising, a double quartette from the united choirs from the First and Second Congregational Churches, poured their voices soulfully into that affecting lyric: —

"Home again, home again, from a foreign shore,
And oh! it fills my heart with joy
To greet our friend once more."

The leader of the choir had tactfully altered the possessives in the song so as to convey the impression that the populace's heart was filled with joy at seeing the distinguished citizen from foreign parts home again; at which the distinguished citizen from foreign parts, or, to follow the lines of the lyric, "foreign shore," arose and bowed profoundly right and left, with his hand on his heart and amid terrific applause.

The song concluded, the honored Principal arose and in felicitous words, interspersed with appropriate quotations from the Latin and Greek, introduced the distinguished citizen from foreign shores by insisting that no introduction was necessary for "one whose foot was on his native heath and whose head was crowned with the laurel of distinguished accomplishment."

Long and insistent was the applause as he ceased, and as the distinguished citizen from a foreign shore arose. Handkerchiefs fluttered in mimic snowstorm, bright eyes and smiles of welcome outshone the sparkle of lantern or the glare of gas.

Thrice he began to speak and thrice was he interrupted by thunderous acclaim. Finally his white and ringed hand, raised in modest deprecation, gained him a hearing, and in a voice husky with feeling he began: —

"My dear, dear friends and fellow-citizens:

the rewards of distinguished services, the appreciation of those great in the counsels of the nation — the approbation, the respect, and the friendship of foreign and titled dignitaries, is little compared to the ties of friendship that bind one to his home town, and especially when, as in this case, one can feel that he has continued to hold and enjoy the friendship and has won the appreciation and the approbation of these home friends."

The distinguished citizen's voice faltered, and he paused and pressed a white handkerchief to his eyes while several of his audience sobbed into white handkerchiefs, and one old gentleman cleared his throat with a ringing "horaghm! ah-r-rgm!"

The distinguished citizen continued: "Yes, my dear friends, in fulfilling the important mission with which I have been entrusted by those of our nation in supreme authority, it has been my good fortune to see the cities, the towns, and the people of the Orient and the Occident; to observe their manners, their customs, to note their peculiarities of dress, of language, of religion. And I am, perhaps, frank in saying that in some things they are undoubtedly in advance of us. In some, I say, but in many we are immeasurably their superiors. In our home spirit, our home life, our freedom from excesses, our respect for women, our religious and political freedom and tolerance, and our cleanliness.

"And of the latter, in passing, I wish to say a word. In the Orient, in the Occident, in many of the finest and richest towns and cities of those countries, physical cleanliness is a thing practically unheard of. Sights, sounds, and stenches that would not be tolerated one moment in a New England town are the rule in foreign towns and cities. But, my friends, since I have landed in New England I have not beheld a sight that was not fair, I have not smelled a scent that was not sweet and clean."

Just then a fitful breeze stirred the leaves and wafted to his nostrils a hideous stench from the business conveyance of the boys. He paused, and it was gone, but several of his audience turned their heads inquiringly in the direction from which it came.

"For a moment, my friends, the recollection of those smells was so vivid that I almost believed they were in our midst. Thank Heaven, good friends, we in New England are, have been, and will be free from any annoyances that spring from uncleanliness, either morally, mentally, physically, or politically."

Again a horrid odor swept over the assemblage, and heads turned angrily, while the orator took a sip of water and mopped his face. There was a hurried consultation of some in authority and a brawny attendant tiptoed from the garden to the boys, who were sitting in rapt absorption at the splendid scene.

"Here, you young ruffians, you take that infernal old rackabones and that old cart out of here, or I'll break your backs," he hoarsely whispered, as he grasped the horse by the bridle to lead him away, while the orator began again.

"And speaking of cleanliness I wish to say a word about cleanliness of language, in which, I believe, we are far in advance of other peoples and nations. Truly it has been said, 'Let your communication be Yea, Yea, and Nay, Nay, for whatsoever is more than this cometh of evil,' and — What in hell is the matter?" he roared, as a series of fearful equine squeals and hoarse imprecations arose and a kicking, squealing horse burst through the fence and into the inclosure with a burly figure hanging to its bridle and swinging to and fro like an ear-ring.

It seemed that when the attendant spoke so roughly to the boys and seized the bridle, the reins dropped from Plupy's hands and the old horse felt them touch its tail. Here was the opportunity it had waited for so long, and the tail gripped the reins and the mad animal bolted for the audience, squealing and kicking. The audience fled, holding up its skirts and shrieking;

the orchestra seized its instruments and rushed for the grove; the distinguished stranger vaulted over the rail like a youth of twenty and fled to the house, leaving the hostess to look out for herself; the Honorable Court shinned up the nearest tree with the agility of a boy of fifteen; the three boys pulled, sawed, shouted, and swayed dangerously from their perch on the pitching, splashing, spattering cart, and the attendant hung on with gasping grunts and curses, occasionally touching the ground with jolting infrequency. Round they went, twice round the garden, treading down choice plants, knocking down latticework frames, generating every sort of horrid and ungodly stench until the wheel cramped, the boys flew out, the body of the cart turned over like a wrestler thrown over the shoulder of his opponent, and came to the ground a wreck of shattered boards, and with a squattering splash, and the horse, freed of his burden, stopped quietly.

And then the guests came out, the populace descended from trees and crawled from under various places of refuge, and the peasantry swarmed through the broken fence and discussed the matter in high-pitched, strident voices and with great animation.

It was a dreadful mess, — a dreadful, dreadful mess! The boys had fled through the trees and across gardens to Court Street and home. The

Honorable Court had withdrawn to his hotel, fearing lest he might be biased in the hearing of the morrow; the populace and peasantry, leaving the attendants with mops, brooms, pails, wood ashes, disinfectants, and deodorizers to clean up.

And on the morrow the hearing took place. The view was had; the evidence heard, — and such evidence! The deacon's lawyers fought tooth and nail; the Honorable Court was a just and unbiased Court; but the injunction was made permanent, and the Honorable Court in signing the decree underscored its name thrice. The deacon went out of business owing Plupy, Beany, and Pewt two week's arrears in salary. And thus once more did evil fortune smite them heavily.

VI

THE MEETING OF THE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY

The next morning the story of the unfortunate termination of the reception to the distinguished citizen from a foreign shore was known to every one in town and exhaustively discussed. The day after, for journalistic enterprise was not as keen in those days as in the present day, most lurid and amusing accounts filled the city dailies. The names of the parties were given, — those of the boys and their employer in large type, — and the story adorned with every flight of fancy that imagination could suggest.

The boys were intensely flattered by the more or less veracious accounts of their life and sufferings, and the highly colored narrations of their attempts to earn an honest living in various lines of endeavor; but their relatives were horrified, and their mothers so earnestly laid the matter before their respective husbands that these worthy burghers decided to call a meeting of the advisory board, consisting of these gentlemen, sitting in Brad's paint-shop with closed doors.

It was a very common thing for these gentlemen to spend a part of their day of rest in this shop discussing matters of common interest. Pewt's father, known to his associates as "Brad," as usual repaired to his shop after breakfast, and in his shirt-sleeves and carpet-slippers took a seat and slowly and deliberately cut thin slices of tobacco from a plug, ground it thoroughly in his palms, loaded an old corncob pipe, lighted it with much puffing, leaned back and alternately spat and sent out clouds of fragrant blue smoke. Soon Plupy's father, "George," appeared, clad in a sort of picturesque négligé, his ordinary Sabbath costume, followed after an interval of a few minutes by Beany's father, "Wats," resplendent in a most stunning attire and smoking a silver-mounted meerschaum. George, whose daily trips to Boston as a government employee compelled him to dress well during the week, took occasion to lounge and loaf on Sunday in the most nondescript garments, while Brad and Wats, whose business as painters, grainers, and paper-hangers compelled them to wear during working hours the checked blouse and paint-encrusted overalls of their trade, appeared on Sunday in the guise of gaudy butterflies but recently emerged from the dingy chrysalis.

"Seen the papers, Brad?" queried the elder Shute, as he knocked the ashes from a five-cent cigar.

"Ain't seen nothin' else," replied that gentleman rather snappishly.

"Whatcher got to say about it, Wats?" continued Plupy's father.

"Dunno, George," replied Wats doubtfully; "them boys are the infernalest boys I ever see," he continued, quite appropriately and with entire conviction.

"Seems to me we did n't use to have any such carryin's-on when I was a boy, did we, Wats?" opined Brad judicially, making an astonishingly accurate shot for the pipe-hole in the chimney and replacing his pipe with the consciousness of a deed well done.

"Never in this world," said Wats convincingly. "Of course, I did n't live here when I was a boy, but I guess boys were pretty much the same in Maine 'n' New Hampshire then, 'n' the boys down my way in Saco 'n' Biddeford were pretty good boys."

"That's so," said Plupy's father; "I believe it, for the boys of my day, when Brad and I were at school here, were pretty respectable chaps. I wonder what the reason is for the change? I don't understand it."

"Wall, George," said Brad, "one really bad boy in a neighborhood can do a good deal towards making jailbirds of every other boy in that neighborhood. Now, when I moved down on Court

Street, I cal'late there wa'n't a better-behaved 'n' more reliable 'n' dependable critter in the hull State than that boy Clar'nce of mine. But jest as soon as he began to crony 'round with that ere Harry of yourn, I began to see a difference. He wa'n't the same boy nohow. S'phi seen it, too." And he changed legs and spat convincingly.

"Well, Brad," said the elder Shute, with a growing gleam in his eyes, "you may be right, but it would be pretty hard to convince me and my wife and all the rest of us that before your boy came down here to this neighborhood the boys here were not as good a set of boys as they were in our time. Wats's boy, Elbridge, was about the only boy in the neighborhood that people were suspicious about, and he was well enough until he got in with your boy." And the elder Shute bit his cigar in twain to emphasize his point.

"Well, as to that, my boy was in this neighborhood before either of your boys, 'n' up to the time that Harry Shute 'n' Clarence Purinton came here, I never heard a word of criticism from any one. Since they came into this neighborhood he has been in trouble all the time. I have told him more 'n forty times that if I catch him with either Clarence Purinton or that Harry Shute, I would take the hide offen him." And Wats glared about him as if challenging contradiction.

"Jest what I said to Clar'nce," said Brad; "'Clar'nce,' sez I, 'if I ketch ye with that Shute boy 'n' that Watson boy, I'll raise welts on ye all up and down ye ez big ez school rulers.'"

"I'm glad you both did, and you have no idea how I appreciate your kindness. Anything that will keep your two boys from associating with mine receives my most unqualified approval," said Plupy's father, with fine sarcasm, his eyes retiring deeply beneath their beetling brows. "And I told my boy that if I ever caught him with that Pewt and that Beany, as they call them, I would tan his hide so that it would n't hold water, and that if I ever caught either of those rascals on my premises I would hang them. And I want to say right here," he continued, bringing his hand down so hard on the bench that hardware rattled, paint slopped, and the glorious Goddess of Liberty in her gaudy frame, holding aloft the evenly rippled flag, almost sprang from her perch, "that I believe those two boys came honestly by their deviltry and inherited it from their fathers who are no better than the boys."

Wats and Brad sprang to their feet crimson and choking with indignation, reminding one forcibly of the occasion when

"Each guest upstarted at the word
And laid his hand upon his sword
With fury-flashing eye."

What the result might have been nobody can say. Whether Plupy's father could have held his own with his two opponents, smaller, but wiry and toughened by daily feats of climbing ladders, or whether he was destined to go down in glorious defeat overpowered by numbers; whether or not the air would be thick with paints, brushes, gaudy chromoscopes, rolls of wall-paper, putty-knives, paste-brushes, ceiling-scrapers, oils, sizing, galvanized action, and bursts of profanity, or they would adjourn to the green, peel and settle their difficulty by a triangular battle to the dismay, consternation, astonishment, and delight of the happy church-goers, was never satisfactorily settled.

Happily for all concerned, their good name, fame, and reputation, happily for the close friendship that had endured between them for years, Plupy's father's temper was as quick as a flash of powder and as soon over; and the sight of these ordinarily peaceful citizens, filled to the brim with good will to all, springing to answer the call to arms and breathing defiance, was too much for his risibles, and he broke into a roar of laughter that lasted until the faces of the two other fathers began to relax, the fire to fade from their eyes, and the corners of their mouths to work.

"Don't see whatcher laughin' at," said Brad, dropping a hickory stirring-stick which he had instinctively reached for.

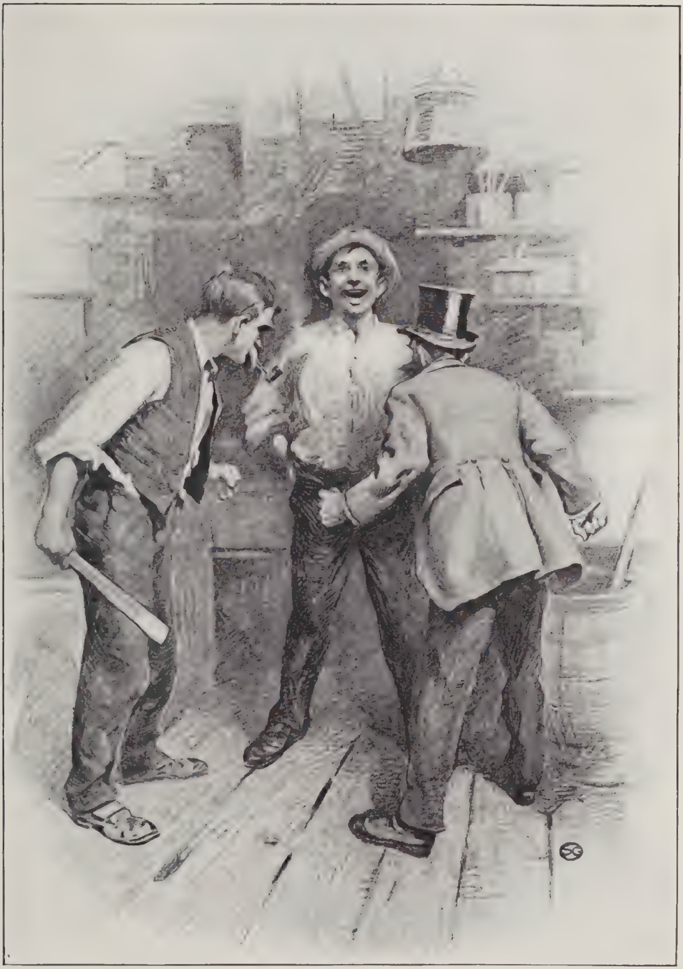
"Neither do I, George," said Wats, unclinching his fists and allowing the white to die out of his knuckles and the flash of anger to fade from his face; "it ain't no laughin' matter."

"Sit down, Brad; sit down, Wats; you two infernal old jackasses. I'll take it all back; I'm worse than any of you," and he roared again. "Did you ever see such a set of infernal old hypocrites as we are. Good, reliable boys we were, were we? I don't know what Wats was as a boy, but I do know that Brad and I were the two worst boys in town and ought to have been in jail for life. Say, Brad, do you remember the time we rigged a tit-tat-to on Betty Clifford's window and had half the neighbors looking for spirits."

"I remember it, yes," said Brad, grinning sympathetically. " 'N' the next night when we tried it with a brick 'n' it went through the window 'n' took the sash with it! — Yes, yes, George, what jailbirds we were," said Brad, chuckling and puffing his pipe, while Wats grinned and lit his.

"And do you remember when we climbed into the First Church steeple and tied a cord to the bell-tongue, ran it to a tree in the next lot, and tolled it at twelve o'clock every night for a week?"

"Gosh! yes, George, I shall never forget it," said Brad, wiping his eyes.



HE BROKE INTO A ROAR OF LAUGHTER

"Do you remember when Jim Melcher and you and I found where the Selectmen threw the crows' heads for which they paid bounty, and we used to crawl in under the office floor and get those heads and get pay for them again?"

"Remember it! I should say I do; 'n' if them old heads had n't got so high I guess we would have been doin' it now," gasped Brad, choking on a misdirected puff of acrid smoke.

"Who threw the skunk-bladder into the Hard Shell Baptist Revival meeting, Brad?"

"I did n't, George, honest, now," said Brad, slapping his knees; "did you?"

"No, I swear I did n't," said George; "some said it was Bill Clark, some said me, some laid it on to Jim Melcher, and others on to Bill Young. I was there, though. Great snakes! how those revivalists did come piling out of that church, 'phewing and spitting just like a lot of crazy tom-cats; oh, dear, oh, dear," gasped Plupy's father, while Wats held onto his sides with both hands. "'Member when the Adventists were holding meetings over Jewell's paint-shop and we took down the steps and then started the fire-alarm and they came out heels over head."

"Don't, George, I shall bust if you say any more," pleaded Brad, almost in collapse; "we were the toughest set of rowdies in this country."

"And that is n't all. I could sit here for two hours and tell one thing after another that Brad and I did with some of the other good, reliable Sunday-School boys of the time, — Bill Young, Jim Melcher, Roland Folsom, Charlie and Jim Folsom, Bill Bowley, Charles Taylor, and a few other sissy boys that we would like to have our boys take after. Oh, I could tell a few things," said George, shaking his head ominously, while his eyes danced.

"Tell 'em, tell 'em, George," said Wats, with enthusiasm. "I did n't know Brad was such a feller."

"Brad! well, he was about the liveliest boy in this town. Ever hear of the time he peppered the clam chowder at the fireman's ball supper?" asked Plupy's father.

"Now, look here, George, they ain't no sense in layin' that on to me; you know that you 'n' Jim Melcher 'n' Charles Taylor got that thing up, 'n' I did n't have anything to do with it," protested Brad.

"Who bought the pepper? tell Wats that," said Plupy's father.

"Who paid for it 'n' got Jim Melcher to put it in? Tell him, George, tell him," urged Brad in his turn; "only tell it as 't is."

"Well, what did you do? Tell a feller 'n' don't keep him waitin'," urged Wats.

"Well, you see, the fire companies in those days had an annual ball some time in January, to which the Amesbury and Newmarket and South Newmarket boys were invited. It was a great time, and began with a supper, generally a clam chowder in the court-room at about half-past six, and afterwards a ball lasting from eight until about five the next morning.

"An old colored man named Archelaus Husoe usually got up the chowder, and made it in a huge cauldron holding about two barrels. A committee of the companies always went to Hampton Beach the day before and got two barrels of fresh clams, and generally got drunk before they returned. Then another committee shucked them, — I mean the clams, not the committee, — and got them ready. The afternoon before the supper Archelaus Husoe and a half-dozen other niggers, Tashes, Harrises, and Husoes, took charge of the cooking and serving.

"There was a committee of firemen to receive the guests and another committee on liquid refreshments, which were generally new rum and gin. All the firemen appeared in red shirts and helmets, and it was a very lively time. Old Archelaus had a good idea of effect and insisted on promptness, and at precisely half-past six o'clock the long tables were ready, with the pint bowls filled with steaming chowder, the cups with fragrant coffee, the crackers and pickles and large spoons ready. Then the company marched in with their ladies and took seats, the chairman gave the signal, 'Play Away,' and the spoons were dipped and the feast began. Thus there was no haste and no delay. No slopping of the contents of bowls down the necks or over the shirts of the men or the dresses of the ladies.

"To do this successfully Archelaus had to engage plenty of aides, and as he preferred gratuitous service when he could get it, and as those who helped him could attend the ball and hear the music and fill up on chowder and pies, beans, cake, and other dainties, invitations to help wait on table, carry chairs, arrange dishes, and keep the chowder from burning were much sought after by the boys.

"So that evening Brad, Bill Young, Jim Melcher, Charles Taylor, and a few other choice jailbirds, not including myself, of course, — I include myself in the crowd but not in the jailbirds, — were among the waiters and assistants. Well, we worked all the afternoon and had a good time, and if it had n't been for Brad everything would have gone all right."

"Why on account of me?" said Brad.

"You keep still, Brad; I'm telling this story," said Plupy's father. "Well, as I was about to remark, Brad was always full of the devil and up to all sorts of unexpected things, and so it occurred to him —"

"Come, now, who put up this thing, anyway? 'T was either you or Jim —"

"Hold your horses, Brad, I have the floor," said Plupy's father, continuing; — "to put something in the chowder to warm them up a bit. He first suggested a gallon of rum, but we could n't get it, as we had no money."

"You suggested that, George, yourself," interrupted Brad.

"And so Brad said a couple of pounds of cayenne pepper would warm things up in good shape."

"That was what Jim said," protested Brad.

"And so Brad went down to Nat Weeks's store, and bought a couple of pounds of cayenne.

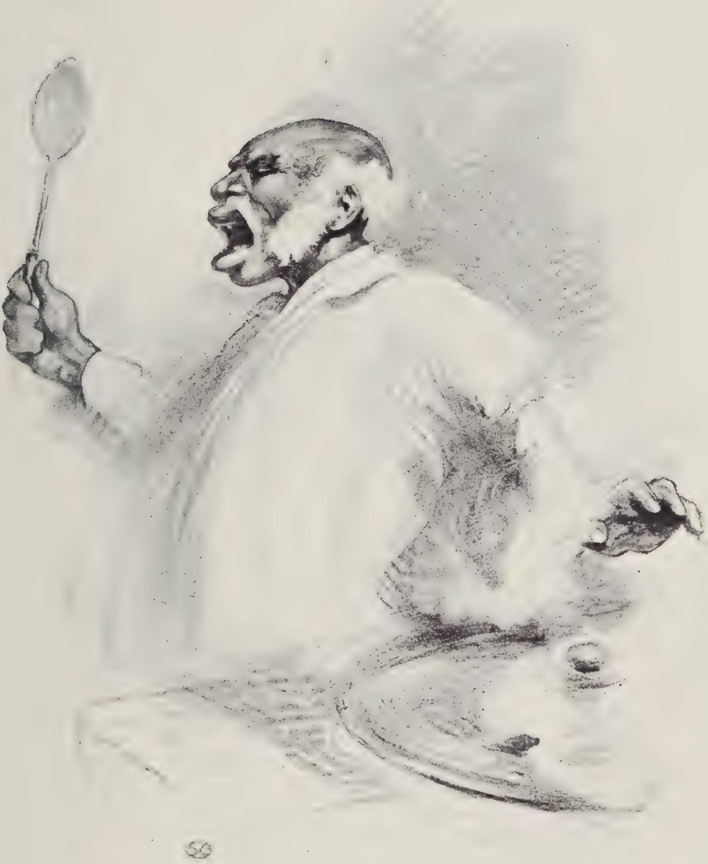
"Then Jim and I were left to stir the chowder, and Brad, who was helping the other boys arrange the tables, purposely dropped and broke a plate, and the moment Archelaus heard that, he dashed out into the court-room to see what the trouble was, and I, that is, I mean Jim Melcher, poured the whole two pounds into the chowder, and before Archelaus came back we had got it pretty well stirred in. Of course, when Archelaus came back he sneezed and we sneezed some, and Archelaus swore at us for sneezing towards the cauldron, and then he began to sneeze again; but it happened that some one had upset a pepper-shaker on one of the tables, and Archelaus had been brushing it up and so he did n't suspect anything except that he thought we were mocking him; you know a nigger is a bit sensitive when it comes to any one sneezing before him; you remember the song —

'Nigger, nigger, never die,
Black face and chiny eye,
This the way the nigger goes, 'choo, 'choo, 'choo!'

Well, he swore at us, and said he would knock our heads off if we did n't stop; but he was too busy to do it, and as he had tasted the chowder just before he went out and had pronounced it all right, he did n't taste it again, and we were safe, as Archelaus, although a nigger, was as neat as a pin and did n't allow any one else to taste it.

"So he filled the bowls and had them carried in and placed on the table, and every now and then he gave a loud sneeze and cursed the boy who upset the pepper-shaker. At last all was ready, and the orchestra struck up and the firemen, their guests, and ladies marched in and took their places. Just as there was silence and the chairman was rising, Archelaus let out a sneeze that nearly raised the roof, and made every one laugh. Knowing what was coming I thought I should die.

"Then the chairman said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, eat hearty and give the house a good name'; and then he shouted through his trumpet, 'Play



A SNEEZE THAT NEARLY RAISED THE ROOF

away, Two,' and every one dipped his spoon and took a good swallow, and then made a frightful face, and of all the spitting, coughing, gagging, sneezing, retching, cursing, and swearing, I never heard anything like it. Brad and I were on duty in the upper part of the hall, and I could see Archelaus and the other niggers, with their mouths open and eyeballs bulging like crocky doorknobs, wondering what the trouble was.

"Some one cleared his throat enough to yell, 'The black nigger put cayenne pepper in the chowder,' and every one who could speak without choking to death began to yell, 'Kill the niggers, kill the black cusses'; and a score of brawny fellows who had fortunately spit before they swallowed the fiery chowder, made a rush towards the kitchen, while the rest clawed at their own throats, choked, gasped, and gurgled and fought for water, and the niggers scattered like rabbits.

"Well, there was a tremendous row made about it, and an investigation was made and prosecution threatened. We boys were scared to death about it, but when our turn came to be examined lied like pirates, and it was never found out who the miscreants were. Enough was developed to show that the cook had nothing to do with it, and I think the firemen after a time paid his bill. They were a good set of fellows, a bit rough in their ways and a bit too partial to rum, but they had their good points. Still, as they were firemen, they ought to have been able to stand a little thing like cayenne pepper. But it was a mean trick, and it would n't have happened if it had n't been for that Brad Purinton."

"'N' that George Shute," chimed in Brad, "who thought out the whole thing."

"Well, to tell the truth, while I cannot truthfully disclaim some responsibility in the matter, I doubt very much if any one would believe for a moment that I was the ringleader of the boys of that time. But it was hard on those niggers. I shall never forget how they scattered. Some of them were not seen for days. It was said that Archelaus Husoe ran eight miles toward Northwood without stopping. I have an impression that some of those niggers never did come back. At all events, there was a black skeleton found in the woods halfway between Kingston and Fremont two years afterwards."

"A black skeleton, George, ye don't say! I never heard of that. You remember how black them Husoes were. Ez likely ez not, 't was one of them Husoes," said Brad excitedly, while Wats nodded in silent confirmation and Plupy's father nearly strangled over a puff of smoke.

"Well, those were great times, but I don't know as we were any better when we grew up," said Plupy's father. "Remember, Wats, just after you got here, the big fight with the Newmarket gang that began in Rufe Cutler's saloon? You came downtown that night with a velvet coat and a tall hat, and waded right in. We never saw the hat again, but I remember how that velvet coat looked when the fight was over and we had cleaned them out. You were always a dressy cuss, Wats, but that time you were the raggedest and most bunged-up individual I ever saw."

"I remember that, too," said Brad; "I came out of that with my nose turned way round on one side, one eye closed, 'n' both thumbs out of joint, 'n' I had promised to paint 'Peace on Earth and Good Will to Men' on a big banner for the First Church Sunday-School the next morning, 'n' I did it, too, but I cal'late I did n't quite git into the spirit of the thing."

"'Member the next fight we had with them Newmarket and South Newmarket fellers?" chimed in Wats. "I was down at the Wiggin Tavern at South Newmarket, 'n' it begun in the front entry. Some one said something to you, George, that you did n't like, 'n' you hit him 'n' knocked him halfway up the front stairs. Then the fight begun 'n' lasted for over a half-hour, but they were too much for us that time. I remember George Hitchens 'n' the three Husoe boys got separated from the crowd 'n' were chased down to the wharf 'n' jumped in, swam across, 'n' came back home through Stratham. Those Squamscott Machine Works fellers were a pretty tough set."

"Yes, but we had ought to got licked that night, for some of our best fighters wa'n't there. Al Lane and Ben and Plummer Kelly, Jerry Tanner and Newt Marsh were away, and there were some Eppin' fellers there to help the South Newmarket gang.

"But the next time we licked them on their own grounds. That night they had a big crowd of fighters from the three towns, and we had all our best men, the Lane boys, Jim Robinson, Ben and Plummer Kelly, Ben, Jim, and George Ellison, Jerry Tanner, Bill Clark, Bill Young, George Hitchens, and the three Husoe boys, — and how those niggers could stand thumps on the head! We met 'em in the square and they had arranged it pretty well. Remember those two roads; one going towards Littlefield's Crossing and one down towards the river? Well, they had posted a big gang of men down these roads, and when our crowd had all got by and started in to tackle the main crowd, these two gangs piled on us from behind to cut off our retreat. But we were not retreating very much that night. I was never in such a fight as that in my life. It was punch, hit, clinch, let go, butt (I saw Archelaus Husoe butt a South Newmarket fellow a rod), knock down, and drag out. If a fellow was down we tramped right over him. There was no time to stop for the wounded. It was every man look out for his head and wind. Apart from the fact that sometimes a fellow had two or three at him at once, it was a square fight enough, and no clubs or rocks were used and no brass knuckles, and I don't think any one was struck while down except when two fellows had clinched and were rolling on the ground and hammering each other. We everlastingly cleaned 'em out that time. They sent for old Judge Blackford, of Newmarket, and he stood up on a barrel and read the riot act, or tried to; but they yanked his barrel out from under him, and he came down heels over head and struck for the nearest doorway.

"After we had driven them out of their own square and chased them into alleys, we collected our men and marched back. Every fellow was more or less bunged-up, but nobody badly hurt and every one could walk, and we all felt pretty good over the result. Seth Tanner and George Hitchens wanted to burn the Wiggin Tavern, and we had to persuade them not to and bring them along with us. The next day there was a lot of talk about it, and there was talk of prosecution for riot, but they would have had to arrest about all the able-bodied young fellows in four towns, and I guess they thought better of it. That was the last big fight we had," said Plupy's father, sighing over the decadence of those degenerate times.

"But there was plenty of excitement besides fights in those days," sighed Brad. "'Member the fights with the students?"

"Uh huh," said Plupy's father, relighting his stump of cigar.

"'Member the time the people raided Dan Meader's saloon, George?"

"Thunder, yes, Brad, I guess I do remember that," said George, discarding his glowing stub in his interest in the recollection.

"What about it, Brad?" asked Wats; "'t sounds interesting."

"Let George tell it; he has the knack of making things look full ez well ez they are," said Brad, with marked emphasis and a humorous wrinkle at the corners of his mouth.

"Go ahead, George," said Wats, "spin her out."

"All right, gentlemen," said Plupy's father, "thanking Brad for the compliment and Wats for his flattering interest in the matter and the attention he gives to my modest yarn, I will endeavor to satisfy a curiosity natural under the circumstances."

"You see, Wats," he said, relapsing into his more natural manner and flicking the ashes from his cigar, "there used to be a saloon on lower Water Street, nearly opposite where Tom Conner's store now is. It was a low, shedlike building, and was kept by a small humpbacked man named Dan Meader. Dr. Price, a little wizened colored man who wore a tall hat and cleaned clothes by steam, lived near there. You remember him, Brad?"

"Uh huh," said Brad, removing his pipe and shooting a deadly brown streak into the pipehole in the wall.

"There were a number of other saloons on the street — George Harris's and Rufe Cutler's, but they were pretty decent places. At that time all the grocery stores sold New England rum by the glass at three cents a glass, and allowed the customer to pour out his own drink. But only the more respectable men patronized the grocery stores. The bad men all flocked to Dan Meader's place. He sold the hottest brand of liquor ever known: made out of fusil oil, logwood shavings, and old-fashioned hotdrops.

"There were some awful fights there. Not decent, properly conducted, harmless affairs, such as I have told about, when fellows, full of ginger, fought with their fists for fun, but fights with glasses and bottles and chairs and bungstarters.

"The place got an awful name. The hardest citizens in the town congregated there every night and raised particular Cain. They would go home at midnight, or two or three in the morning, yelling and screeching like wild men. People began to be afraid to go by the place at night, and there were several complaints of men being robbed and thrown out.

"Finally, the better class of men in town began to talk about taking the matter up. My father was interested in it. You remember him, Brad, a gentleman if ever there was one in this world. He was a frail, sickly man, but he had the courage of his convictions. The local officers were not up to their work, the county sheriff did n't give them any satisfaction, and a secret meeting was held in the vestry of the First Church. Jim Melcher and I got in by the door leading to the belfry and sat down by the ventilator where we could see and hear everything. Father made the last speech. I can see him now, straight as an arrow, slender as a reed, his eyes gleaming like coals and his upraised hand quivering with feeling. He finished in these words: 'Gentlemen, I am and have been a law-abiding citizen. I yield to no man in my respect for the constitution, the laws of our State, the customs and ordinances of our town; but when these laws have been defied and trampled on, when public decency has been outraged, public and individual safety endangered, disorder let loose in our midst, our wives and daughters insulted, our boys in danger of being corrupted; when roisterous drunkards and thieves make our nights hideous with their drunken revelry, their licentious and obscene talk; when the legally constituted officers of the law offer no protection, even though sworn complaints are placed in their hands, it is time for the reputable citizens of this town to abate this nuisance by force, and we are unworthy to be citizens of our town if we shirk this sacred duty.'

"Well, after father spoke they laid their plans to meet the next night at eleven o'clock at father's trunk store and to go down and raid the place. After they had gone, Jim and I came down and skinned for home.

"Well, in some way it leaked out that something was to happen the next night. Never mind how, but just what was to happen nobody knew. If it came to the ears of the Meader gang, they paid no attention to it, unless, perhaps, they got a more numerous and tougher gang together and began earlier to sing and yell and whoop. I know father told me not to go out that evening, and mother and the rest of them were very much worried. But as soon as father left the house I skipped out.

"At nine o'clock the stores closed, but there were a good many persons on the street. At ten there were crowds of people quietly walking around, sitting in groups, but making very little noise. The noise inside was enough to drown any noise outside. By a quarter of eleven the noise, the cursing and swearing and yelling, was awful. I would n't have gone into that place for a thousand dollars. Every one waited with hearts thumping. Ten minutes to eleven, five minutes, three, two, one, eleven struck from the town bell, and then we heard them coming down Water Street. The only noise they made was their regular marching step as they marched two by two. Every fourth man carried a lantern and each man walked with a heavy oak staff. There were the very finest men in town, dressed in their best black coats, white stocks, and stovepipe hats. A dozen carried between them a peeled hemlock tree about six inches through, and not a man looked right or left.

"I tell you, gentlemen, I never had such a feeling go through me as when I saw that sight. A lump arose in my throat, and I was so excited that I could scarcely breathe. I think every one felt the same, and a big hulking man near said in a hoarse whisper, 'God! those men mean business!' When they arrived at the house they formed a double ring around it, and my father stepped up to the door and knocked with his heavy stick. Instantly there was silence within.

"'Who's there, and what do you want?' sounded Dan's shrill voice.

"'Daniel Meader,' said father, 'in the name of the State of New Hampshire I command you to open this door.'

"'Go to blazes! you——'; and then there was a terrific yell inside and the most awful cursing I ever heard. Father came down the steps and said, 'Break in the door, men,' and about twenty men got hold of the log and ran towards the door. When that log struck the door it smashed it into kindling wood, and the men went in like sheep through a hole in the fence.

"We expected a big fight, but the appearance of these men with their oak clubs, their broadcloth coats, and the vigor with which they smashed in that door took all the fight out of the rowdies. One or two started to resist, but they were knocked down. The majority broke for the windows and doors, but found themselves in a trap, and surrendered. Then the raiding party brought out all the jugs, bottles, kegs, barrels, and cases of liquor, smashed them and poured the liquor into the river, and took out the doors and windows and pulled down the building. Then at about two o'clock in the morning they started with their prisoners in barges for the Massachusetts line, and when they arrived there let them go, warning them that if they ever came back to Exeter or to this State, they would hang them."

"By thunder, George, that was pretty fine, I think," said Wats.

"Fine! I should say so," said Plupy's father, with shining eyes; "the finest thing I ever saw. I tell you, that sight did more to straighten out some of our young fellows than anything that could have happened. Not because they were afraid, but because they saw, perhaps for the first time, the best element of the town insisting on their rights and the rights and interests of all. And there was n't a man or boy in the crowd that would n't have followed those men right into the jaws of hell, and if those roughs had started in to resist they would have had the whole town on them. I was only a boy, but I hunted up the biggest stone I could find and edged towards the saloon, and all the other men and boys were ready, too.

"So now we might as well admit that we don't want to have any more of this fool talk about being good boys when we were young. I tell you, Brad, and you, Wats, that our boys are pretty decent boys, as boys go, a long ways ahead of us, which, perhaps, is partly due to the times and the change of things for the better. And I think we have made a mistake in keeping them away from each other. If my boy is over here with my permission and yours, he will be more likely to be out of mischief than if he were off somewhere with Clarence and Elbridge against our will. They will be together somehow and we might as well make the best of it. And the same is true of both your boys. They are a set of lively boys, but I believe they will turn out all right. We did, and I'll swear we were twice as bad as they were. — Hello! time to go to dinner."

"Hold on a minute, George," said Wats, who was not to be diverted from the main question by absorbing narratives, "what's to be done with these boys? It is really time for the schools to open, — one week from to-morrow, ain't it, Brad?"

"Uh huh, one week from to-morrow," asserted Brad, cleaning the stem of his pipe by running a broom-straw through it and blowing through it until his eyes nearly popped out and the corners of his mouth drew down like a bald-headed gentleman in the orchestra playing the bassoon.

"Now Elbridge is bedeviled to go to work 'n' don't want to go to school any more, 'n' I think the best thing for me to do is to get him a chance to work about one week 'n' he 'll be willing to go back to school 'n' stay there," continued Wats.

"That's a good idea, Wats; my boy is just in that condition when he is no good in school and almighty little out of school. He feels like going to work and won't study, and he says Brad's boy is just as bad. — Crazy to work, eh, Brad?"

"Uh huh," said Brad; "'Clar'nce,' sez I, 'Clar'nce, ef ye a-bound to work, 's all right; when I wuz young I never had no chance to go to school much, 'n' if I wuz you I would stick to school'; but Clar'nce he won't hev it, 'n' I think we better gin 'em a little of their own medicine; whadger say, George?"

"I'll tell you what I will do. You know Getchell has advertised for boys to learn the plumbing trade. Now the first thing to put the boys doing at Getchell's is lifting iron pipe and stoves and pig lead and other things, and after about three days of it a boy would prefer to go to the reform school rather than stay at work. Now, I'll see Josh and make arrangements for him to take these three boys. Just you leave it to me and don't any one put in his oar. I will see him this afternoon, and you send the boys down to my house this evening."

"All right, George, we will leave it to you," said Wats and Brad.

And the three worthies shook hands and separated, each one feeling in his heart that his boy was a good deal better than the other two. And so the boys gained a point in the removal of the embargo against associating one with another.

VII

HOW GREAT A DIFFERENCE ONE SMALL LETTER MAKES

The evening of the same day the three boys, delighted at their uncensored association one with another, came grinning into Plupy's yard where Plupy's father sat smoking, and reported to that gentleman.

"Well, boys," he said, removing his pipe, "I understand you don't care to go to school next week. What's your reason?"

"'Druther go to work 'n' earn some chink," said Plupy.

"'T's about time to be gettin' to work if a feller ever intends to," said Pewt, hitching up his collar and pushing his false bosom back into place.

"I hate school ennyway," said Beany, "'n' I'd ruther go to work than to school."

"But if you could leave school and not work, would n't that suit you all better?" asked Plupy's father with a whimsical smile.

"Huh!" said Beany; "they ain't no such thing as not goin' to school and not doin' nuthin' neither."

"That's so," said Pewt; "gosh! no!"

"Wisht there was," sighed Plupy.

"In other words, boys, you think the millennium won't come just yet?" said Plupy's father.

"Dunno who he is," said the boys, much mystified.

"Well, boys, I've got a job for you, and one that I think you will like," he continued.

"Gosh!" said Beany fervently, "that's bully."

"You bet," asserted Pewt with emphasis.

Plupy's emotions overcame him to the effect that he said nothing, but lifted one gaunt leg up twice to an astonishing height and breathed heavily through his widespread mouth.

"I want you boys to start in to learn plumbing; that is a mighty good business and pays better than anything I know except burglary and embezzlement of trust funds, and —"

But he got no further, for the boys interrupted him with raucous yells.

"Plummin'!" yelled Plupy; "plummin'! Just what I wanted to do. Oh, golly!" and he cavorted afresh.

"Plummin'!" screeched Beany; "ain't that jest rippin'?"

"I know the best place in this world for them," yelled Pewt.

"Easy, boys, don't get excited; you may not like this trade quite so well after a few days of it. Now, this is the way I have arranged it. To-morrow morning you go down to Mr. Getchell's store and tell him you are the three boys I spoke to him about. Then he will give you whatever supplies you need and tell you what to do," said Plupy's father.

"I guess we know what to do all right," said the three boys exultantly, wagging their heads knowingly at one another.

"Well, perhaps you won't be so cocksure of yourselves in a day or two, and may be willing to learn a thing or two," insisted Plupy's father reprovingly.

"Oh, yes, Mr. Shute," said Beany, anxious to propitiate the bearer of such cheerful tidings, "we want to learn everything about it, but how can we go plummin' in the winter?"

"You need n't bother about the winter yet. There is more plumbing in the winter season than at any other time and the plumbers get better prices," said Plupy's father.

The boys looked a bit dubious at this, but cheered up in view of the delights of a practically immediate future. But the practical Beany had a question to ask.

"What if old — I mean *Mr.* Getchell won't give us our supplies without pay?"

"He will give them all right; you need not worry about that one bit," said Plupy's father reassuringly.

"Well, sayin' he had changed his mind?" persisted Beany.

"He won't change his mind. But if there is any trouble, why, just wait until I get home," replied Plupy's father.

"But," insisted Beany, "if he should change his mind, it would be pretty tough to lose a whole day when we might be workin' 'n' earnin' money."

"Oh, as to that, if you are so particular about it, I will write a note to him. You have certainly got the right spirit about starting in, and if you only persist in that spirit, it won't be very long before you all are expert plumbers," said Plupy's father.

"Well, I don't believe it will be very hard to be expert plummers if we know the best places," opined Pewt.

"Well, the best place I know is Getchell's, and you go there. Kelley and Gardner keep good hardware and groceries, but they don't do any plumbing," said Plupy's father, as he went into the house. He soon returned, with a note which read as follows: —

MESSRS. JOSHUA GETCHELL AND SON: —

GENTLEMEN: — The boys of whom I spoke to you are somewhat apprehensive that you may change your mind in relation to furnishing their supplies without a cash deposit. As they are anxious to begin work, and I wish to encourage industry, I trust you will be willing to make this arrangement with them: Let them have whatever supplies they may need and charge the same to my account. Then I will see that they pay me for the same, and in the end they will, I hope, be in the possession of more money than they expect.

By this diplomatic stratagem I may possibly work a reformation in these boys in relation to their habit of thoughtless waste of time.

Very truly yours,
George S. Shute.

Plupy's father read as much of this to the boys as he thought proper, and then sealed it and handed it to Beany with instructions to deliver it to Mr. Getchell in person, informed them that their mothers would put their noon lunch up for them, and having urged upon them the necessity of cheerfulness, tact, industry, and promptness, left them with the caution to say nothing to any one about their business.

Left alone, they withdrew to the barn and in bated breath discussed their wonderful streak of luck.

"Plummin', gosh!" said Plupy; "I never had enough of plummin'; we can eat all we can hold at first, then fill our pails 'n' stop at noon 'n' eat our lunch under a tree, 'n' in the afternoon sell our berries 'n' rake in the chink."

"Yes," chimed in Pewt with immense enthusiasm, "'n' we can do a little fishin' whenever we get near a pond or river."

"'N' we can build a fire 'n' fry our fish 'n' eat 'em," chuckled Plupy.

"'N' have a swim," seconded Beany, who was so fat that he could float like a cork.

"'N' p'r'aps get a shot at a duck or patridge," said Pewt.

"Say, fellers, was there ever ennything so lucky! I wonder what has got into our fathers? We have got to do some pretty good work or we'll never get another chance," said Plupy, looking to the future.

"Oh, we gotta work part of the time. 'F we don't we'll lose our jobs. 'F we fail a few more times we will be about ready to hang on to posts all the time jest like some of those old bums. This time we've got to do somethin'," said Pewt.

"Well, 't ain't been our fault before. We made money every time. When we run the paper, 'f it had n't been for people bein' so darn sensitive we need n't had no trouble. A feller had n't oughter get mad when a feller has wrote the truth about him," said Beany; "huh! they ain't no sense in that, 'n' we was makin' more dosh than I could spend, too."

"We were leather heads to strike on the paper-carryin' job," said Plupy; "they ain't no doubt about that. But that was Pewt's doin'. He wa'n't satisfied with makin' money."

"Well, ennyway, Plupe, I done all I could to get you out of the scrape 'n' make old Smith, Hall 'n' Clark raise our pay."

"Yes, you did, did n't ye!" scoffed Plupy hoarsely; "you got me a good bloody nose from that stewdcat when I sailed in 'n' you and Beany did n't dass to —"

"Huh!" said Beany, "talk about sailin' in; huh! you would n't ha' dassed to sail in if Pewt had n't pushed you."

"I would ha' dassed to, 'n' I was jest a-goin' to sail in when Pewt pushed me so quick that I could n't dodge him. I was goin' to dodge under him 'n' get the underholt 'n' then you fellers could lam him," said Plupy in an aggrieved tone of voice.

"Huh! that's a pretty way to fight. Hold a feller 'n' let the others lam him. I'd be ashamed to fight that way," said Pewt in utter scorn.

"I'd be ashamed to be afraid 'n' run like white heads when another feller is holdin' him, ennyway," said Plupy.

"But ye did n't hold him. 'F you had, we'd 'a' stayed all right. Why in time did n't ye hold him?" queried Beany scornfully.

"Cause Pewt gimme a push, 'n' I could n't, 'n' you fellers left me there 'n' run. I guess I know who had ought to been ashamed. Ennyway, 't ain't me," yelled Plupy.

"Huh!" said Beany.

"Huh!" said Pewt.

Then there was a pause and they scowled at each other balefully.

Finally Beany's face cleared. "What time you goin' down to Getchell's to-morrow, Plupe?" he inquired amiably.

"Oh! 'bout six, I guess," said Plupy with affected carelessness.

"The store ain't open till about seven," said Beany.

"Thasso," said Plupy, restored to his usual cheerfulness. "Les' all meet there at seven 'n' get the things we want. Lessee, we want three six-quart pails, 'n' some dinner-pails with cups like the workin' men have."

"Six-quart grandmothers!" said Pewt; "what we want is ten-quart pails. We had ought to pick ten quarts in 'bout an hour or hour 'n' half 'n' sell 'em easy."

"Thasso, Pewt," said Plupy eagerly; "we can't pick ten quarts in a six-quart pail."

"I tell ye how we can do it," said Beany, who was somewhat addicted to gastronomic pleasures; "we can pick our six-quart pails full, then pick two quarts apiece 'n' eat 'em, then eat the lunch out of our pails, 'n' then pick two more quarts in our lunch-pails. That makes ten quarts each. Lessee," he continued, pulling out a pencil and muttering, "Six 'n' two is eight 'n' two is ten, put down your naught 'n' carry your one, one 'n' naught is nothin'. — Say," he continued, "that ain't right. If we pick ten quarts 'n' eat two, they must be somethin' left."

"'Course! you loon; they is eight quarts left. 'F you et 'em all, they would n't be enny left,' explained Pewt.

"Unless there would be a fearful old bellyache," added Plupy facetiously.

"I know it seems so, but I tell you it don't figger so," said Beany; "look here, six 'n' two is eight," he continued, as the boys looked over his shoulder, "'n' two is ten, put down your naught 'n' carry your one; — that 's all right, ain't it?"

"Uh huh," said Pewt.

"Uh huh," said Plupy; "chuck her down."

"There," said Beany, making a cipher with some twisting of his tongue and facial contortion.

"Then carry your one, loony," said Pewt.

"Why don't you carry it, Beany? — chuck her down," said Plupy, with earnest admonition.

"Hold on; don't be too darn fast," said Beany;

"that's where the trouble is, Plupe; they ain't nothin' to go down, — one 'n' naught is naught."

"One 'n' naught is naught; whatcher talkin' about!" snorted Plupy; "one 'n' naught is one, — putter down."

"Won't," said Beany obstinately; "one 'n' naught is nothin'."

"Look here, Beany," said Plupy; "one is one, ain't it, now?"

"Uh huh," assented Beany; "enny fool would know that."

"'N' naught is naught, Beany, ain't it?"

"Uh huh; 'course it is," said Beany.

"'N' if you have got one 'n' don't add nothin' to it, it makes it one, don't it?"

"But you do add somethin' to it; you add naught; you gotta add naught to it to do the example," said Beany doggedly.

"But naught is nothin', ain't it?" said Plupy, catching himself by the hair and lifting hard.

"Uh huh," said Beany; "naught is nothin' all right."

"'N' if you add nothin' to one, it makes it one, don't it?" explained Plupy.

"But you said first, 'if you don't add nothin' to it,' 'n' now you say, 'if you do add nothin' to it.' Which do you mean? Why don't you say which way you want to do it 'n' stick to it?"

"'Cause it don't make no difference whether you do add nothin' or don't add nothin', it's nothin'!" yelled Plupy in great excitement; "nothin's nothin', 'n' you can't add it or subtract it or multiply it or divide it, 'n' you oughter know it."

"That ain't so," said Pewt, who had been following the arguments with a wrinkled brow and deep thoughts; "there was a feller in Boston which took a ten-dollar bill 'n' added a naught to it 'n' got a hundred dollars fer it 'n' got in jail fer it. So Beany's more right than you be."

"That's so, Plupy," said Beany; "you ain't so smart as you think you are. One 'n' nothin' is nothin', ain't it, Pewt? Ennyway, I can prove it."

"Lessee ye do it," dared Plupy.

"Well, I can, and you jest see," said Beany confidently. "How much is five times one?"

"Five, of course," said Plupy; "gimme a hard one."

"How much is one 'n' one?" continued Beany, with a sinister gleam in his eye, while Pewt nodded sagely.

"Two, of course," said Plupy; "whatcher tryin' to get through you, ennyway?"

"How much is five times naught?"

"Naught," added Plupy, "just as I told you."

"Who said it wasn't?" demanded Beany in some heat. "Well," continued Beany, with finely calculated logic, "if five times one is five, 'n' one 'n' one is two, then multiplying is more than adding."

"'Course it is," said Plupy; "I could have told you that."

"But you did n't, did you, come now, did you?" demanded Beany.

"No, I did n't, 'cause you did n't ask me," said Plupy sulkily.

"Well, if multiplyin' is more than addin', 'n' if five times naught is nothin', then, of course, one added to naught can't be as much as five multiplied by naught, which ain't nothin'. Whatcher got to say about it, now, old Plupe?" demanded Beany triumphantly.

What Plupy, who jumped to his feet red-faced with anger, would have said to contradict this statement and refute Beany's logic may never be known, as the boys were called home and left, after promising to meet at seven the next morning.

The next day at seven o'clock the boys were at Getchell's store, and were very much disappointed when they found that gentleman had taken the six-thirty train for Boston. When they presented their case to the good-natured manager, Mr. Willis, he asked for their authority, and was given the letter of credit from Beany's father.

Having read this, and impaled it on a sharp hook, he expressed to them his entire willingness to honor their demands to a reasonable amount. Thereupon the boys ordered three tin ten-quart pails, three dinner-pails, three quart dippers to pick into, three leather belts. These articles were regarded as necessary tools of their trade. Then with the laudable desire to protect themselves from foreign invasions, domestic seditions, and dangers from wild animals, they bought a double-barreled pistol, a pound of powder, and a powder-flask and bullet-pouch. Then, as mere luxuries, they purchased three braided linen fish-lines, a hand-painted rubber frog, and a collection of assorted hooks, all of which articles were charged to Plupy's father at a sum total of six dollars and seventy-five cents.

Then running home they ate their breakfasts hastily, had their lunch-pails filled by their anxious mothers, to whom, mindful of their promises of entire secrecy, they told nothing, and departed on their quest.

Rumor had it that berries were plenty on the Epping Road section, back of the Oak Lands, and so they journeyed thither, talking, as only boys can talk, of their prospects.

Leaving the road by the Johnny Watson place, they struck into the swamp land. There they proved that Rumor was more truthful than usual, for here they found the high-bush blueberries luscious and abundant, and they at once began to pick and eat, with unctious "ums!" and "ahs!" of satisfaction. It seemed as if they could eat all day, and that Beany's project of eating two quarts each might be a possibility. But they realized that they must be prudent and get a pailful each if possible, and after a while the soft drum of the berries on the bottoms of their cups began. It was most interesting work, and they worked eagerly, pulling down tall bushes and picking rapidly, at times breaking into whoops of delight and surprise at finding particularly large and juicy berries.

But berry-picking is to most people a rather tiresome task and not without accidents and mishaps. Beany got into a thorn bush and painfully lacerated his legs and hands, and Plupy, after filling his tin cup to the brim, tripped and fell heavily as he was racing to pour its contents into his pail, and lost most of them in the underbrush, roots, and moss.

Pewt alone, having eyes and instincts for the woods, as well as very nimble fingers, picked nearly twice as fast as the other boys and got better berries, and much cleaner picked. When the noon hour arrived, he had picked nearly six quarts of fine, ripe berries, while Plupy and Beany had picked about three quarts each, and all three boys, despite the fact that they certainly must have eaten a pint each, were in a state of famine impossible to describe.

"Gosh!" said Plupy, wiping a very red and scratched face, "'bout time for grub. I'm 'most starved."

"So'm I," said Beany, pouring a half-cup of berries into his huge pail. "By time! I did n't know it took so many berries to fill a ten-quart pail. Come on, Pewt."

"Hold on a minute; I want to finish this cup full," said Pewt, who had just found a well-filled bush.

"Oh, come on, Pewt, le's build a fire; I could eat a dead rat," said Plupy.

"No, we don't want no fire," objected Beany. "It's too darn hot, ennyway, 'n', 'sides, it takes too long. I wisht I had a drink of water."

After a while Pewt filled his cup, and then the three boys sat down under a giant pine and opened their tin dinner-pails. Bread and butter, doughnuts, hard-boiled eggs, apple pie, and a bottle of coffee, much sweetened and very weak. Mm! Mm! what a feast and what appetites.

"Gosh! this is fun," said Beany, mumbling through a huge mouthful.

"Google-oogle-oogle," gurgled Plupy, quaffing a bumper from a bottle; "'s bully."

"M'chump, m'chump, m'chump," went Pewt's teeth steadily through a huge slice of bread and butter.

"Tell ye what le's do, — m'chump m'm, — fellers," said Beany, "after we — glug-glug, oom — get through eatin', le's — m'glug — go sell our berries."

"Thasso, Beany, 'n' after we — m'chump, oogum," said Plupy, stretching his neck like a hen in his endeavor to swallow a hastily masticated mouthful — "get through —"

"Hi, there, Plupy! keep your hand out er my berry-pail; 'f you want to eat any berries, eat your own," yelled Pewt.

"Arh-h hoag-g- hoag-g- s-sptu!" shouted Plupy, spitting furiously; "I chewed up a squash bug, — s-sptu-u-u-oag."

"Served ye right fer eatin' outer my pail," said Pewt indignantly.

"You need n't be so mean 'bout your old berries; you had more 'n I did, ennyhow," said Plupy reproachfully, wiping his mouth with an extremely soiled and dingy handkerchief.

"Yes, I've got more 'n you lunkheads have because I picked while you two fellers et. 'F you'd worked the way I did, you'd have had as many," retorted Pewt with warmth.

"Huh!" said Beany, drawn into the discussion by no fault of his own; "you would n't have had so many if you had n't hogged all the best bushes."

"I did n't neether," snarled Pewt; "I got the best bushes 'cause I found 'em. If you fellers could see an inch beyond your nose, you could do it, too."

"I guess we can see as well as you, old Pewt; you ain't so smart," jeered Beany.

"Well, I picked more berries than you did, did n't I?" demanded Pewt, as one stating an axiom.

"Who said you did n't?" said Plupy, backing away from so self-evident a truth.

"'N' I've got 'em, ain't I?" said Pewt, again advancing an irrefutable proposition.

"Well," said Plupy, "what if you have? What-ofit?"

"Well, I'm goin' to keep 'em," said Pewt with finality.

"Ain't we partners? ain't we, Pewt, ain't we, Plupy?" demanded Beany.

"'Course we are; who got up this thing, ennyhow?" piped Plupy, his voice flying off the handle in his earnestness.

"You did n't; neether of you fellers got it up; neether of you knowed enough," said Pewt, his eyes snapping with anger.

"Whose father got it up? Whose father got us our job 'n' whose father bought our tin pails?" yelled Plupy.

"I don't care," said Pewt, with exaggerated scorn; "I did n't go into no partnership with fellers who want to eat while I work."

"'N' we did n't go into partnership with no feller which wants to take all the profits, did we, Beany?" growled Plupy, with a gasp of indignation.

"Me, too, did n't," chimed in Beany, his face red with anger.

"Well, whatcher goin' to do about it?" demanded Pewt, with elaborate unconcern, dexterously flipping a jackknife into the ground.

"I'll tell you what I'm goin' to do 'bout it, Pewt. I'm goin' to take my father's pails, 'n' pistol, 'n' fishin'-lines, 'n' things, 'n' Beany 'n' I are goin' to be partners, 'n' you can carry your old blueberries home in your pockets," said Plupy with determination.

"Ho!" barked Pewt, becoming suddenly very much alive to the occasion; "lessee you get 'em; just come 'n' take 'em, come on, now." And he squared menacingly.

"We both can; come on, Beany; we're partners now 'n' have got to stand together," said Plupy, calling up his reserves.

"I'm with ye, Plupe," said Beany, springing into the breach with promptness. "Pewt has needed a lickin' for some time." And the two boys advanced with wary deliberation upon their late business associate.

Now Pewt, under ordinary circumstances, was rather more than a match physically for either one of the boys, as he was in coolness and craft. But he had little hopes of success with both of them as opponents, and the prospect of a thrashing as well as the loss of the partnership effects was enough to make him extremely anxious to avoid the encounter. Pewt was enjoying what would have been known at the present day as a "soft thing," or a "snap," and he was a boy of good judgment, and so he resorted to diplomacy.

"Say, fellers, what's the use fightin' about it? I was only coddin' ye. Y'ought to know me well enough by this time to know that." And he smiled at his indignant copartners with engaging warmth, which had the effect of disarming their wrath, as they were both peaceful lads.

"'F that's so, s'all right 's far's I'm concerned," said Plupy, returning to the earth.

"'S all right for me, too," said Beany, beaming in his turn.

"Now, le's get out the pistol 'n' plug somethin'; let Plupy have the first shot," said Pewt, with unparalleled generosity.

So the boys loaded up their miniature cannon, and tacking a square piece of paper to a tree, shot at this target for a full half-hour, and as they gradually decreased their distance until it was within range, and, indeed, almost within reach of their outstretched arm, they soon had it well pierced with bullets.

Then they again set to work and picked berries for an hour or two, and with their pails about half-full they started back to town, changing arms every thirty yards and sitting down to rest every few minutes; and as wherever they rested they filled in their time in eating out of their pails, they arrived at the stores with the contents of their pails in a somewhat more than decimated condition. They found no difficulty in selling their wares, as there was a brisk demand for berries, although they were somewhat disappointed at the price, which was but eight cents a quart. As the retail price was from twelve to fifteen cents, they threatened to peddle them out from house to house; but as this involved additional carrying of heavy pails, and as Plupy's arms were, as he expressed it, pulled out until they hung several inches below his knees, they closed with the dealer, and divided ninety-six cents for their day's work.

Then, to fill in the day, they went in swimming at the gravel point, and fished for two or three hours with very indifferent success, and finally arrived at their homes so dead tired that they went to bed before supper, and when their fathers arrived they found their respective sons sound asleep.

Meeting Plupy's father that evening, Brad said, "George, I guess ye hit the nail on the head this time. Clar'nce wuz asleep when I got home, 'n' I never knew it to happen before sence he was big enough to git around."

"My boy was, too. He lay there with his hands all stained and scratched, a sort of a blue stain on the ends of his fingers. Guess they must have had him working in lead, soldering, or something of the kind," said Plupy's father.

"I guess after about one more day of it they will be ready to go back to school. Nothing like hard work to reconcile a boy to his books. Yes, George, you sartin' hit it that time," rejoined Pewt's father.

Just then Beany's father drove up in a smart rig.

"Hullo, Brad! Hullo, George!" he shouted. "Got something funny to tell you. When I got home to-night I found out that Elbridge had gone to bed as soon as he got home. His mother said he was just about ready to drop. I thought he must be sick, 'n' so I went in 'n' spoke to him, 'n' whadger think he said?"

"Dunno, Wats," said Brad.

"What was it, Wats?" asked Plupy's father.

"Ha-ha, the funniest thing," laughed Wats; "he half-opened his eyes 'n' said, 'Had a bully time, father, got twelve quarts'; 'n' then he went to sleep again."

"Ha-ha," laughed George and Brad in huge enjoyment.

"Twelve quarts; I guess they did; twelve hundred pounds of lead, I guess. Funny how a boy will dream. It's a good thing to dream of pleasant things after working too hard. It kind of rests a fellow. But he was a game little chap to say he had a good time. I guess he must have been dreaming that, too," said Beany's father. "Had n't we better see Getchell 'n' ask him to go a bit easy on the boys? We don't want to have them break anything or get lame," he went on anxiously.

"No, Wats," decided Plupy's father firmly. "They won't hurt themselves any. The men will see to that. The only way to drive them back to their books is to make them so sick of their jobs that they will have to quit. Of course, we have got to be pretty careful about it, for if their mothers find out about it, it is all off."

"That's so, George," said Brad affirmatively; "if S'phi found out about this, I dunno ez I should darst to go home."

"Well, I charged Harry not to say a word to any one," said Plupy's father.

"'N' I charged Clar'nce," said Brad.

"'N' I charged Elly, too," said Wats; "so I guess everything is all right." And the worthies separated feeling that they had secured a grapevine lock on their sons' obstinate determination to throw away the golden opportunity of a common-school education for which their local town was famous.

VIII

SHIPWRECKED AND LOST IN THE WOODS

The next morning at about eight the boys, still somewhat footsore and stiff from hard work, met for the day's journey. First they decided to exchange their ten-quart pails for four-quart pails, which showed that they were boys of excellent judgment. Next, yielding to a desire on their part to try a part of the country that furnished more attractions in the way of hunting and fishing grounds, they struck for Kingston Pond. This was a beautiful sheet of water about six miles away, said to abound in perch and pickerel. The distance was great, but they thought the prospect justified them in extra exertions, and so they trusted in fortune.

It was nearly ten o'clock when they arrived there, and they were so hot and dusty that they took a refreshing swim as soon as they could peel their clothes. Greatly refreshed by this, they were fortunate in finding plenty of berries, and by one o'clock had filled their pails, when they rested and ate their lunch luxuriously. Then they baited up and fished halfway round the lake, with a success that amazed them and filled them with the greatest delight. Again they swam, tried ineffectually to shoot sandpipers that were flitting along the beach, and refreshed themselves for their long journey home. It was half-past seven before they had disposed of their berries and fish, which netted them eighty-two cents each, and when they had eaten their supper they went to bed in an exhausted condition. Each one resisted all attempts on the part of their respective mothers to find out what he had been doing, beyond saying that he was working and that his father knew all about it.

The next morning Plupy's father had time to ask him where he was, so late, and found that he had been in Kingston. He smiled grimly, but only said, "I suppose you have to go where your work calls you."

"Yessir," said Plupy.

The third day was a repetition of the second. The boys walked to the pond, picked their berries, swam, shot successfully at a mark and unsuccessfully at everything else, fished and delivered their wares at a late hour. They were in somewhat better condition, although very tired. They had caught fewer fish, but these few were gratifyingly large and netted them rather more, each boy storing away the sum of ninety cents against a time of need. After supper they sat up until about half-past eight, and appeared to be satisfied with their lot in life.

Their fathers, the conspirators, began to be a bit worried. According to their calculations the boys by this time should be on their knees begging to be allowed to go to school. Something was wrong with their calculations.

So George went over to see Wats, and he and Wats proceeded to Brad's shop for a conference.

"I did n't suppose for a moment that those little devils would stand out like this," said Plupy's father. "Harry is generally so infernally lazy that it's as much as we can do to get him to fill the woodbox. And how in thunder he sticks it out to work for Getchell as a plumber, beats me. He comes home so tired that he can scarcely wait to eat his supper before going to bed, and in the morning he is ready to go again. I can't see into it."

"Nor I can't either, George," affirmed Wats. "If it had been a job of driving a hack for Levi Towle or Major Blake, or handling baggage for the beach teams, or something like that, I would n't be a bit surprised; but for them boys to be set so on learning to be plumbers 'n' lug spipe 'n' lift stoves 'n' put up tin washboiler for sale without gettin' sick of it beats me."

"The time Harry worked for Tom Conner, he only lasted about three days, but that time he was chased out by old Tom because he hit old Tom on the nose with a sling-shot or some sort of a pistol that shot small pebbles or large bullets. Harry always said it was an accident, but I always thought that while, perhaps, it was an accident in hitting him, it was no accident in aiming at him. I went down to see old Tom about it, and he said those infernal boys waited until he stepped into the store and deliberately let drive at him. You know Tom has a pretty big 'rooter.' Well, it must have hit him an almighty rap, for his nose was as red as a beet when I saw him."

"I think the boys did n't intend to hit him, because I asked Elly about it 'n' he said they were layin' for old Gilmore's plug horse to wake him up, 'n' old Tom came around the corner just in time to get it in the bugle," explained Wats.

"That's what Clar'nce said," testified Brad, "'n' I guess 't must be so, because I never knew Clar'nce to tell me a lie in his life."

"Good Gad!" exclaimed Wats.

"Holy Moses!" shouted Plupy's father.

"What's the matter?" demanded Brad, giving a start of indignation.

"Oh, nothin', Brad," said Plupy's father; "I was just thinking of something I had forgotten to order at the store."

"A cussed hossfly bit me just back of the ear," explained Wats tactfully. "What did you say to old Tom? They say he gave your boy a pretty hard canin'."

"Well, he did; but as I should have done the same under similar circumstances, I was not in a position to say much. I only went down to find out the facts and to satisfy the women folks, who were pretty much excited about it. He claimed that he had lost about fifty dollars by the operation and took me out and showed me his coat where he had fallen flat on his back. It was stiff with molasses. I would have given a dollar to have seen it. Harry said that if he had not slipped, himself, he would have got away."

"Well, so far, the boys hain't got chased out, 'n' 't don't seem 's 'ough they would. But why they like it s'prises me," said Brad; "but I guess 't is because they are working for somebody else than their own folks. Ye remember, George, when we were boys, you alwuz liked to saw wood in my yard better 'n you did in your own, 'n' I liked to saw wood in your yard better 'n I did in my own. 'T is allus so, George, 'n' I guess 't will allus be so," concluded Brad philosophically.

"That will explain a good deal, Brad," replied George; "but there has got to be some fun in it somewhere, to make 'em stick. There may be some fun in plumbing, but the only fun I ever could see that a plumber got out of life was in making and collecting outrageous charges for everything he did."

"'N' often enough for things he did n't do," said Wats, with the deep feeling of one who had lately had some plumbing done.

"Well, gentlemen," said Pewt's father, "guess we'd better let it go a day or two longer. For my part, I expect they'll give up in about two days more, 'n' p'r'aps one, 'n' I'll bate ye they do."

So the other worthies, convinced beyond peradventure of the prophetic vision of that gifted seer, Brad, as well as of his philosophical acceptance of the situation, decided to wait a day or two longer, feeling sure that by that time the boys would be anxious to resume their grammar-school education, which bid fair to be seriously neglected.

The next morning the boys awoke betimes and ate hugely of the family breakfast, demanded loudly that their dinner-pails be filled a little more solidly and to the brim, and started out in high spirits on their long tramp to the pond. This day they had planned a change of programme which involved a slight change in their bill of fare. They had decided to have fish broiled before a camp-fire. They had decided that, however praiseworthy the accumulation of money was, it was not meet that in the accumulation of wealth they should neglect their physical welfare.

They had added to their income by the sale of their fish. They had eaten not a solitary fish, and their appetites, indeed, their whole beings, called loudly for fish. There were fish in plenty and berries in plenty and money in plenty. They were cloyed with berries, they loved money, but they craved fish. Hereafter they would both eat and sell fish. They would sell berries, but would eat not one, at least, not yet. They did n't believe they ever could eat berries again. They did n't even hope they would want to eat any more berries. Hang berries, anyway!

And so, when they arrived at the berry-swamp they picked faster than ever before, and as they wasted none, and had only their pails to fill, they had finished their berry-picking in little over an hour and were ready for the pleasures of the day. Quickly peeling their clothes, they took a refreshing swim, came out, dressed, carefully concealed their pails of berries and dinner-pails, and baited up. A half-hour later Pewt, in crossing a small brook that led into the pond, found an old, rotten boat, half submerged on the shore of the brook. A loud hoo-hoo drew the attention of Beany and Plupy.

"Whatcher found, Pewt?" yelled Beany.

"Found a bully boat, — oh, a ripper; come on over here, fellers," yelled Pewt.

Plupy and Beany tore spattering up the beach and over the smooth stones like sandpeeps.

Sure enough, there was a boat, somewhat damaged, but in farily good condition, considering.

They tried to pull the boat up the bank, but as it was half-full of water it resisted their utmost and grunting exertions. Finally, by all three getting on one side and lifting until their eyeballs nearly popped from their sockets, they managed to tip it far enough to pour out most of the water, and then, by wading in to their knees and pulling the stern round sharply, they drew it nearly out of the water. Then another titanic heave, and they got the rest of the water out. Then they examined it carefully and found that with a little patching up it would do, providing they bailed lustily. There was a small island in the pond with a rocky headland and deep water, where they felt sure they could get some large fish.

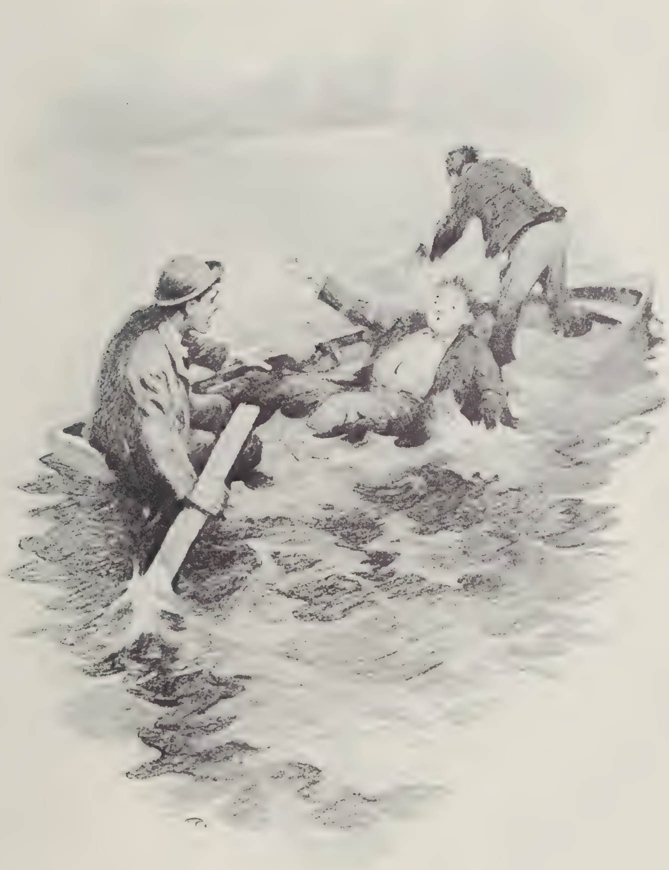
So they set to work, and in a short time had the boat in a fairly serviceable condition and in the pond. The water ran through the cracks rather freely, but with their pint dippers they could bail it out a little faster than it ran in, and they felt sure they would have no trouble, and with Plupy bailing vigorously and Pewt and Beany paddling skillfully with two paddles improvised out of a board, they struck out for the island, a half-mile distant, trusting in that kind Providence that watches over boys, and soon beached their boat on the sandy beach.

Then they fished, and from the deep water just beyond the rock they pulled out splendid perch, and although it was broad daylight, but somewhat overcast, they caught two or three enormous hornpout, that occasionally bite in the daytime in deep water. Before long they had enough for their meal and to carry home, but, allured by the unusual size of their fish, kept on until their hunger was so keen that they desisted, strung their fish on a long strong withe, where they made a brave show, and started for their boat.

And now for the first time since they started out in their new profession, Fortune turned her glowing and amiable countenance from them. As they were paddling and bailing in friendly rivalry, suddenly Beany's leg went through the rotten bottom of the craft. Had he left that plump member to stop up the hole, all might have been well, but he exercised his first and primitive instinct, to withdraw that member with a yell of surprise and horror, and a stream of water poured into the doomed craft.

"She's sinkin', fellers; she's sinkin'!" yelled Pewt; "turn her towards the nearest shore; paddle like thunder, Plupy; bail your darndest, Beany!"

Beany, with great presence of mind, promptly sat down in the bottom of the boat in the hole he



THE LAKE POURED OVER THE SIDE

had made, and, as he was an extremely plump youth, for a while the hungry waters of the lake were baffled; but not for long, as, in spite of his generous weight, the rush of the water fairly floated him away from the fatal hole and the boat rapidly began to settle.

Any one who has been in a boat partly filled with water knows how extremely difficult it is to keep the boat right side up. The slightest movement rocks the boat, its fluid contents rush to one side, and over goes the boat.

This was the case with the boys' boat. Plupy and Beany frantically paddling, one on each side, kept the boat fairly level, but Beany, in his exertions to keep his seat and to bail at the same time, rocked the boat. The boys yelled directions and threw their weight on the opposite side. Back she came, the water surging powerfully. More yells and more violent dodging about by the boys, until the lake poured in over the side, and the boat and the boys disappeared in deep water far from the shore.

Only for a few seconds did the boys remain under, but reappeared sputtering and blowing water from their mouths. Pewt and Beany were good swimmers, but Plupy was a sort of human bullfrog, and encouraging one another they struck out for the nearest shore, swimming easily so as not to get what Pewt termed "tuckered out," and after a swim of about fifteen minutes they dragged themselves, streaming water and somewhat exhausted, on the beach, and took an account of stock. They had lost their hats, their fishing-tackle, and what was of more importance, their string of beautiful fish.

"Gosh darn it!" said Plupy, stung to extreme language by the irreparable loss; "ain't that just our thunderin' luck! Just as soon as we've caught the best string of fish we ever caught in our lives before, to lose 'em like this."

"Plupe, we can ketch some more," suggested the optimistic Beany.

"Naw, we can't neither!" snarled Pewt, "'cause we ain't got no more hooks 'n' lines."

"Gosh! that's so, 'n' that makes it worse 'n ever," lamented Plupy. "Well," he continued resignedly, "I'm 'bout starved. I could eat a raw hornpout. Le's go over to where we left our dinner-pails 'n' dry our clothes in the sun 'n' eat our dinner. Ennyhow, we 've got enough to eat even if we ain't got any fish."

And now, Fortune, not contented with her ill treatment of the boys, administered another sly rap, probably for old acquaintance' sake; for when the boys sought to act on Plupy's advice, they found to their dismay that they had landed on the farther bank of a deep wide stream, and they found themselves cut off from their commissary department, with neither bridge, ford, nor boat in sight. Immediately there was a discussion as to whether or not they should swim the river in their clothes or without them, or walk upstream until they found a bridge or ford.

Plupy, the human bullfrog, urged the former course, which he advocated as "just's easy as nothin'."

Pewt, also a good swimmer, was willing to swim the river, but advised removing their clothes, wringing them out, and carrying them on their heads; but Beany, whose long swim had severely tried his powers, absolutely refused to enter the water again under any consideration.

Then Plupy was urged to swim across and bring back the dinner-pails; but he refused flatly, taking the retributive theory that if Beany was so "scart" and so mean that he would let them starve to death rather than wet his feet again, he would see Beany starve before he would swim the river twice, and for his part he guessed he could stand it as long as Beany could.

Finally, it was agreed that they should wring out their clothes and hunt up a place to cross the river dry shod, and they stripped and wrung out their clothes powerfully and then donned them in a much wrinkled and somewhat clammy condition. Then they started up the stream, and in a short time were in a glow from their exertions.

Through briers, alders, swampy places, over stumps of huge pines and hemlocks, fences and stone walls, they followed the winding course of the stream for more than an hour, occasionally making a détour to avoid some especially difficult place. At last, when they were beginning to despair of ever finding a bridge, they came upon a highway and a strong bridge. Much encouraged, they crossed the river and commenced their journey dinnerwards, their spirits rising and their fatigue disappearing. The other side of the river ran for a mile and a half or two miles through cleared field and pasture, which the boys made at a jog-trot like horses homeward bound with visions of oats, hay, and water before their eyes.

They were tremendously disgusted to find at the end of this mile and a half stretch another bridge which they had failed to see in making a détour, and still more pained at finding two more on their further progress towards the lake, one of which must have been within a half-mile of the lake. When they found this out, their feelings were too deep for words, and each one accused the others of advising the détour. Their anxiety to complete their journey and get to their belated dinner stopped the dispute and drove them forward. And now, as if to offset the smooth path of their return through the cleared land, they came upon a region almost impassable on account of blackberry vines, wild raspberry bushes bristling with thorns, a tangled network of wild grapevines, and a jungle of underbrush. Here Pewt, the acknowledged pathfinder of the party, proposed an abrupt turn to the right, away from the stream, and in a direction which led to a heavy growth of timber, through which he was confident he could lead them at once to the lake. This seemed reasonable, and they started with renewed hope.

The timberland was farther than they supposed, but they soon reached it and bore to the left, but not as much as they supposed, for, after traveling a half-hour, they found themselves apparently no nearer the lake than before. After an anxious consultation, they started again in a new direction, which they followed for a long time without result. Then they held another and still more anxious conference, at the close of which Pewt, in order to dispel a growing doubt of his ability as guide, volunteered to climb a tree and take an observation, and forthwith shinned up a giant pine to a great height, from which elevated situation he could see several ponds without being able to identify the one they longed to reach. However, Pewt professed his ability to lead them in the right direction without further trouble, and on his descent, they started under his guidance in an entirely new direction, and in about a quarter of an hour, to their intense delight, came out upon the shore of a lake. The shout of Xenophon's warriors, "Thalatta! Thalatta!" at the long-looked-for view of the sea, was a flute-note compared with the shrill and raucous yells of the three boys when they perceived through the trees the gleaming sheen of water. They were tired, thirsty, and well-nigh hopeless. Before them lay food, drink, and rest, and they rushed through the intervening fringe of trees like wild men, only to find themselves on the shore of an entirely different but much smaller lake.

They were so stunned with disappointment that they dropped on the beach exhausted and almost in tears, and lay there for some time in speechless distress.

"Well," said Pewt at last, "we're lost fast enough, but we can get a drink of water." And he rose and, lying down on a rock that lay half in and half out of the water, he took a long drink, making way for the other boys who imitated him, much to their refreshment. Then they washed their hands and faces in the cool water and took a more hopeful view of the situation.

Still, they were quite unhappy and uneasy, and although only the day before they had thought they would never eat another blueberry, their hunger was so great that they spent a quarter of an hour in eating greedily from a bush of ripe berries near the edge of the water. Already the sun was well on its way towards the west and the long shadows were slanting eastward, when they set out again, following the shore of the pond, hoping to find a cart-path or footpath that might lead them to some traveled road. This was a good thought, and within a half-mile they found a wood road that showed signs of recent use, and into which they turned with renewed hope. It led through a growth of splendid pines a most interminable distance. It seemed as if there was no end of towering pines, interspersed with hemlock and an occasional oak. The shadows darkened, and there was a sepulchral quiet in the woods that oppressed them heavily. Plupy felt a strange comfort in clutching his trusty pistol, although it was out of commission from the accident to the boat.

"If only a squirrel would chitter or a bird call," thought Plupy, "it would n't be so gloomy." And when just then a "redder" set up a shrill "skirl" of indignation at the three trespassers, they jumped a foot or more in sudden terror. Then a wood thrush set up its evening song, which sounded eerily and uncanny in the twilight of the deep woods. The boys kept closer together. It would have taken but little to have started them running in a panic, but luckily nothing happened.

By and by it became lighter, the trees were farther apart, and at last they came out into an open pasture through which the cart-path led. The sun was still well away from the horizon, and they followed this path to where it joined a somewhat disused road, down which and in the direction they were going was a house and barn. Joy! they were in sight of civilization, and they hastened their pace as fast as their weary legs would allow them. Again they were doomed to disappointment, for the farm was deserted. But, at least, the house faced a broad, traveled country road that, as Pewt said, "led somewhere." While they were waiting, uncertain in which direction to go, a young countryman came driving along in an empty two-seated carryall. They stopped him and asked him the way to Exeter. He told them it was about four miles, and said that he was going to Exeter; and upon their asking him for a ride told them he would take them there for fifty cents, and upon their saying they had no money, drove off with a sneering laugh and the words, "Walk there, you little devils."

Disappointed in not obtaining a ride, but greatly relieved at their escape from a night in the woods, they started limping towards Exeter, when they heard a man shouting to his oxen, and turned to see a burly, bewhiskered farmer driving a yoke of oxen hitched to a haycart loaded with a grandly modeled load of hay. They stopped and drew up at the side of the road to wait for him, and Plupy, encouraged by his good-natured face and his brisk nod, told him of their plight, at which he smote his knee and laughed heartily.

"Wal, wal, boys, 't ain't no laffin' matter, I know, 'cause I've been in jest such scrapes myself, more 'n once. I swanny, I wisht I had n't et my supper to home stiddier 'n bringin' it along ez I ginerally do; I'd gin ye the hull on it, that I would, boys. But I'll tell ye what ye can do. Ye look 'baout petered aout, 'n' no mistake 'baout it; yeou jist git up on my load of hay 'n' go t' sleep, 'n' jest ez soon ez I git to the square I'll wake ye up. I'm a-goin' ez fur ez old Dr. Bill Perry's, jest beyond Major Blakeses tarven. I'm tew hours late as 't is."

"How can we climb up there? It's pretty high," asked Beany.

"Ho, I'll show ye," said their new friend, and taking them in his brawny hands he sent them flying, one after the other, on the lofty load.

"Thar, now, boys, just git inter the middle on 't whar ye won't fall aout 'n' go t' sleep," said the good-natured giant, calling to his slow-paced cattle.

Aloft in the sweet hay the boys were not long in taking his advice, and fell asleep almost instantly. Just before he went to sleep, Plupy said, sleepily, "If I ever get a chance to do something for that man I'll do it," — a pause, — then with more vigor, "'n' if I ever get a chance to lam the snoot offen that feller which would n't give us a ride, I'll do it, too, —" — and a loud snore continued the sentence.[1]

It was nearly dark when the cart stopped before Dr. Perry's house in the square and at the head of Court Street, where the three boys lived. A few minutes later three bedraggled, tired, haggard, and ravenously hungry boys sat down to belated suppers, and astonished their mothers by the almost unlimited quantity of food which they demanded and greedily stored away. After stoutly evading their mothers' questions, on the plea that it was a secret, beyond admitting that they had passed a wretchedly disappointing day, they crawled off to bed, almost too tired to undress.

That evening the three fathers met on the schoolhouse steps. Ordinarily these gentleman, fatigued with the duties of the day, spent their evenings smoking on the steps of their modest

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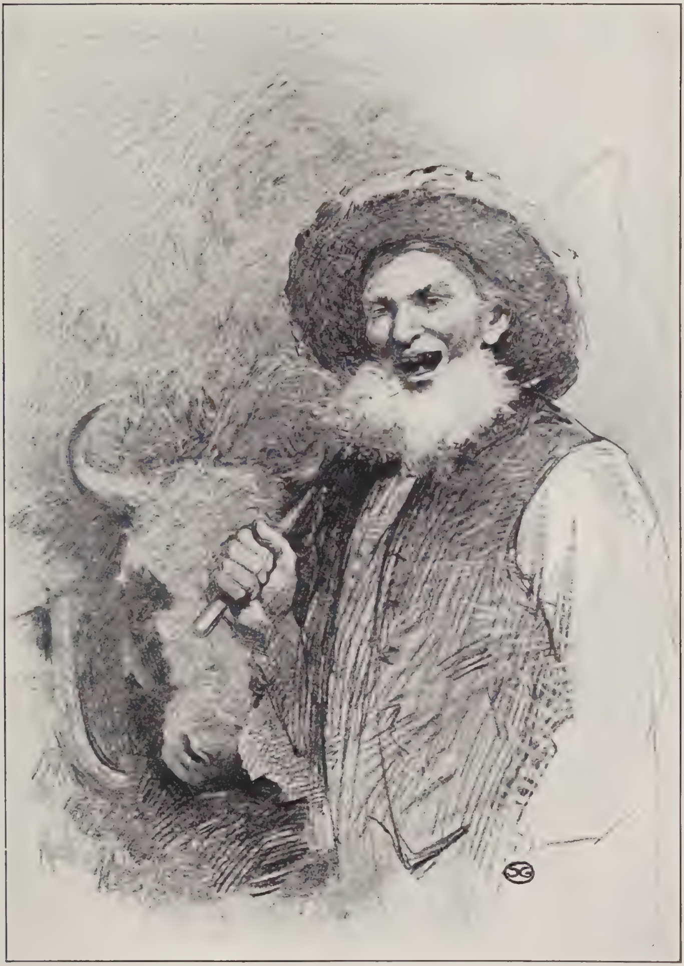
[1] Curiously enough, twenty or more years later, when Plupy was a practicing attorney in his own town, he became counsel for the farmer who had given them a ride, in a most iniquitous suit involving the old man's homestead, which was brought against him by this same man; and not only did he win out and save the old fellow's farm, but he gave the plaintiff so scathing a dressing-down that for a long time he scarcely dared show his face in public.



WAL, WAL, BOYS, 'TAIN'T NO LAFFIN' MATTER

habitations, entertaining the members of their families, and such neighbors and friends as might drop in, with cheerful and enlightening converse. But mindful of the fact that an open discussion of the matter of vital importance could not be held in the presence of any one of the mothers of these boys, without absolute certainty of the exposure and consequent failure of their scheme, they took occasion to hold these little conferences apart from their families in some place convenient of access and conducive to secrecy

The three were quite jubilant when they met, and especially lauded Brad for the accuracy of his predictions.

"It's just as you said, Brad," said Plupy's father, smiling; "about one day more and we'll have those three young rascals promising us anything, provided we will let them go to school. Lessee, to-morrow is Thursday, and they will have had all they want of work. I guess we had better make them work Friday, and Saturday we can let 'em rest up. They will need it, too, judging from the way Harry looked when he crawled in to supper to-night. I had hard work persuading my wife that I was doing the best thing for the boy's interest. If she really knew what sort of work they were doing, it would be stopped pretty quickly, I can tell you." And he replaced his cigar and blew out a fragrant cloud.

"You're right, George," assented Wats; "my Elly came home to-night so tired that he was almost ready to cry. But eat! I never saw a boy eat so much as he did. He was so used up that I was a little worried, 'n' just before I came over here I went up to his room 'n' he opened his eyes 'n' looked at me 'n' said, 'We caught the biggest string of fish I ever saw,' 'n' then he was asleep again. Ho! Ho! ain't that the funniest thing? — did n't know what he was talkin' about; was sound asleep all the time. I never saw the beat of it."

"That's a queer thing about dreams," said George thoughtfully; "you know the saying 'Dreams go by contraries'; there's a good deal of truth in it. Now, these boys have been working like niggers, soldering tea-kettles, putting up stovepipes, piping houses for water, and doing all sorts of hard work that they don't want to do, and only do it to get out of going to school, which they hate worse than work; and as soon as they drop asleep, probably aching in every joint, they begin to dream of going fishing and having good times. I suppose it is a wise provision of nature to rest the mind by taking it from unpleasant things."

"That ain't allers the case, George," opined Brad, with a quizzical smile, "for when me 'n' Wats painted the Goddess of Liberty on the cupola of the town hall, I dreamt I was minin' coal a thousand feet down in the ground 'n' that did n't rest my mind much, I can tell you. But I'll admit that dream went by contraries."

"Well, if things keep this way for about a day more, 'n' the women don't find it out, we are all right; but we 've got to be mighty careful, I tell you," said Wats, impressively serious. "It's gettin' mighty near the end of vacation, with school beginnin' next Monday, 'n' if the boys can stand a week of this kind of work it will be all up with school for those boys for the next term." And he shook his head despondently.

"Well, don't get low over it, Wats," said George cheerfully, clapping him on the back; "I tell you, we have got the net right over their heads, and we are going to have them kicking and hollering to get out and promising to be good; don't you think so, Brad?"

"Ther' ain't no doubt on 't, George; not the leastest mite," said Brad, swinging his feet judicially, and sending a shot into the darkness, "onless the women get onter what them boys is doin'. We got to be a mite keerful o' that. I had a mighty narrer escape las' night. When Clar'nce kem crawlin' in, walkin' limber-legged, he wuz so tired, 'n' et pretty near everything on th' table but th' crockery 'n' dishes 'n' th' tablecloth, 'n' th' knives 'n' forks 'n' spoons, 'n' th' spittoon in th' corner, my wife S'phi, she up 'n' said, 'Bradberry Purinton, what be ye a-doin' to Clar'nce? I want ter know what that boy is a-doin' to make him come home every nite eanamost petered out ter nothin'; I want ter know, Bradbury.'

"Wal, I seen I wuz in fer 't, 'n' I said, cam 'n' dignified, 'S'phi, thet boy is workin' 'n' workin' hard, 'n' I'm a-doin' it fer his good,' sez I.

"'I know it, Bradbury,' said S'phi; 'but don't ye think yer overdoin' it a bit? I tell ye, Bradbury, I worried 'bout it when I see Clar'nce comin' home too tired ter eat 'n' scarcely able to crawl upstairs to bed,' sez she.

"'Great Jerusalem!' sez I; 'too tired to eat! that boy et more to-night than I could eat in three meals, 'n' I'm tol'able hearty myself,' sez I.

"'Well,' sez she, laffin', 'I 'dmit he et enough, but he wuz too tired to do anything else, 'n' I wanter know what he is a-doin',' sez she.

"'Now, S'phi,' sez I, 'I want ye to just trust me to the end of the week 'n' then I'll tell all 'bout it. Ter sorter ease yer feelin's I'll tell yer this much: now, Clar'nce 'n' that Shute boy 'n' that Watson boy is all a-workin' at a good trade, but a hard trade. We's a-hopin' they will git so sick on 't that they will want to go to school 'n' study like good fellers. Ef they stick to their work, they will learn a good trade that will arn them good wages, more 'n I'm a-gittin', which will be a good thing fer 'em. Ef they git sick on 't, they will be willin' to go to school next Monday 'n' put in like good fellers, which will be a good thing fer 'em, too. I cal'late they 're 'bout ready to gin up now,' sez I.

"'Well, Bradbury,'—'n' I knowed she wuz a-comin' round 'cause she left out the Purinton; when she says, 'Bradbury Purinton,' I know suthin' is comin'; sez she, 'I'm a-goin' to trust ye till the end of the week 'n' not a day longer,' sez she; 'only I wish Clar'nce wuz in better company than them boys,' sez she. You see," continued Brad apologetically, "S'phi is a leetle prejudiced; women sometimes are; you don't mind thet, do ye?"

"Not a bit, Brad," said Plupy's father heartily; "I have no doubt these boys have bothered the life out of her. But if either of them or any of the rest of us was sick, she would drop everything to nurse 'em and look after 'em, as she has done time and again."

"That's so, Brad," added Wats fervently; "she is one of a thousand."

"I guess, gentlemen," said Brad, "that ef all the good in us fellers wuz a-multiplied by five, er p'r'aps by ten, that we would n't be good enough for our women folks."

"Not if 't was multiplied by fifty," said Wats, nodding his head sagely, and going the worthy Brad forty better.

"You're right, Wats," said Plupy's father; "more 'n that, too."

"'N' it's kinder tuff to worrit 'em so, but we 're doin' it fer their good 'n' th' boys' good, too; ain't we, George?" appealed Brad.

"We are, Brad," said George.

"You bet," said Wats.

And they separated in high good humor with themselves and the world at large.

IX

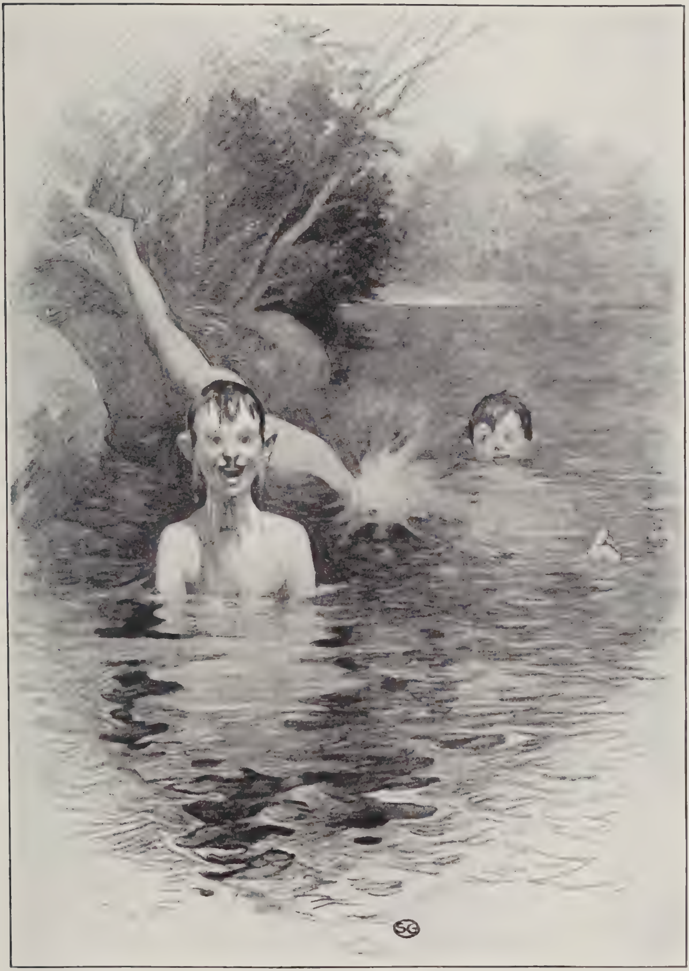
THE BOYS GET THEIR SECOND WIND GREATLY TO THE DISMAY OF THE CONSPIRATORS

Thanks to the nap on the haycart, the hearty and refreshing meal, and about eight hours of sound sleep in their beds, the three boys awoke with their spirits unquenched, and but slightly dampened by their unfortunate experiences of the day before. They were still hungry and a trifle stiff and footsore, but they knew that these ailments would quickly disappear with a little exercise. They felt anxious to be on their way because they felt that they must find their pails or undergo severe penalties and suffer great loss. Besides, as Plupy said, if they found the pails full, as they left them, they could start fishing and swimming, as they need n't pick a single berry.

So they prudently laid in another supply of lines and hooks, and providentially for them and the scheme of their wily fathers, went to Kelley and Gardner's store, instead of Getchell's, as the latter was a hundred yards or more down the street and they were in a hurry; and in a remarkably short while after leaving their houses they were making excellent time towards the lake, in excellent spirits and chattering like a flock of blackbirds. Great was their joy when they found their pails and the contents as they left them, and then they prepared for a leisurely swim, luxuriating in a morning free from carking care and onerous responsibilities. Plupy swam astonishing distances under water, Pewt dove with the sinuous grace of an otter, and Beany floated without wiggling a toe or a finger, so fat was he. Then baiting up, they cast for perch and pickerel, with most gladsome results. Fortune was again smiling. Perhaps the cheerful courage of these small boys had won her favor. Fish bit greedily, fought gamely, and died hard amid yells of joy from the boys.

They built a fire at noon and cooked and ate some of their catch. Never had fish seemed so toothsome and delightful. Never did bread and butter, boiled eggs, apple pie, doughnuts, and day-old coffee taste so well. After dinner they rested awhile, went in swimming, dressed, and started home in huge content. The dealers welcomed them and paid liberally for their berries and fish. This night each boy added one dollar and seven cents to his pile of currency, and as it was band-concert night did not go to bed until nine o'clock. Their mothers breathed a sigh of relief. But the fathers! What of them?

That night again the three fathers met after



A LEISURELY SWIM

the band concert. This time Brad was not as complacent over his predictions as on the former evening. Something was wrong with his calculations, and he did n't like to have his predictions go awry. Both Wats and George were uneasy about it.

"It looks to me, Brad, as if we were in a corner. I don't like the way things look," said George querulously, as if it were Brad's fault.

"Well, George, 't ain't my fault," said Brad quickly, resenting his tone. "I did n't start this 'ere thing; it was your proposal, George."

"Yes, that's so, George; you got us into this scrape 'n' now you got to get us out; ain't that fair?" asked Wats.

"Ye-e-s, I suppose I did start the cussed thing, but I had no idea it would work the way it seems to be working," said Plupy's father slowly, realizing that it was his move.

"I had no idee there wuz so much work in them little cusses, no more 'n I hed an idee a beef critter could fly or a goose could gobble. Mebbe the best thing thet could happen to them or to us is to hev 'em stick to it. Th' ain't no better job than plumbin', now, I tell you," said Brad, bringing out his plug of nigger-head and his knife.

"The job's all right, Brad; I'm not finding any fault with the job," said George; "a plumber's trade is worth more than a burglar's jimmy to make money! But those boys are not old enough to leave school yet, and we have got to make some arrangement to get them back to school without breaking our word to them. We can't do that, but perhaps we can get out of it some way."

"Can't we buy 'em by givin' 'em wages to go to school?" queried Wats.

"Not if I know myself," said Brad, with a thread of excitement foreign to his placid nature; "onc't I told Clar'nce I'd gin 'im ten cents a week to go ter school, 'n' Clar'nce he started out ter go reg'lar, 'n' then, before I knew it, I wuz payin' 'im ten cents more a week for studyin', 'n' ten cents more fer not bein' tardy, 'n' ten cents more fer comin' right home after school wuz out; 'n' finally, I got mad 'n' told him that ef he did n't go to school reg'lar 'n' study, 'n' git thar in time, 'n' come home to his meals prompt, I would welt the tarnal hide offen 'im; 'n' he done it, I tell you."

"That's right, George; Brad's right; 't won't do to pay 'em. Those little devils would bankrupt us in a month," shouted Wats earnestly.

"The only way I can see is to wait until they do some sort of mischief that they ought to be licked for, and then, instead of licking them, to order them off to school. That appears to me the only solution of the matter, and unless they have changed considerably within a week, we won't have long to wait," said George hopefully. "Why, only last week Harry did something that I ought to have tanned his hide for, and I would have done it if I had n't laughed so much."

"What wuz it, George?" said Wats, anxious for a story.

"Well, you know, his grandmother wears a double set of false teeth, which she takes out at night and puts in a glass of water on a little light stand by the side of her bed. One day last week she forgot them and came down to breakfast without them. It was Sunday, and I was there to breakfast. Well, I told Harry to go up and get them for his grandmother, and when he came down, what do you think the little cuss had done?"

"I dunno, George," said Brad, "onless he broke 'em."

"Well, that boy had put both sets into his mouth, and came into the room with a grin on him that reminded one of a cross between a beaver and a pumpkin jack-o-lantern. Well, it was so funny that we all laughed, but it was n't so funny for him, after all, for I thought I would have to split his mouth to his ears to get them out," said Plupy's father.

"Well, boys," said Wats, "we've got two more days. If they don't git sick of their jobs by that time, we 've got to trust to their doin' something Sunday to get licked for, 'n' then we 've got 'em where we want 'em. Whassay, Brad? Whassay, George?"

"I cal'late that's jest what we've gotta do," said Brad philosophically.

"You're right, Wats," said Plupy's father. And the three separated thoughtfully.

The next day, Friday, was one of those late August days when there was a tinge of September coolness in the air, when a boy in good health tingles with life from his head to his toe, and dances along like a yearling colt ready to jump out of his skin with condition, and so these boys awoke and jumped out of bed without yawning and stretching. At breakfast they were full of spirits, and their mothers felt their fears groundless as they beamed upon their hearty offspring and smiled at their appetites, as they packed their dinner-pails to the brim with plain and wholesome fare. While they would have given much to know the secret of their hard work, they respected their confidences and asked them not a question.

The trip to the lake seemed shorter than ever, the air was so crisp and clear. The full-grown young of the swallows were sitting in rows crowding the telegraph wire, and darted upward in clouds when the boys would throw a stick against the wire. The bluebirds were beginning their fall songs, after having disappeared in the pastures during the late spring and summer. The bobolinks had completely changed their suits and were flying over the fields with the sharp "spink, spink," which seemed a brisk farewell to the North. Pigeon hawks were numerous, and alternately hovered with rapidly beating wings over the fields and darted downward upon a field mouse or mole. Far above with motionless wings hung a huge hawk, drifting, with sudden swoops magnificent, from left to right, rising and falling with ease, and floating like a thing without weight or care. The corn stood lush and green, the ears well formed, the tassels erect and stiff like bayonets. The potato tops were still green, but verging on the yellow as the tubers ripened. The fields, but lately brown from the hot July and August sun, were becoming green again, and in patches the second crop of pink-blossomed clover attracted bees and vivid scarlet butterflies. It was a day that filled one with the joy of living, and the boys, secure in their promised immunity from school, felt that they were on the high-road to success and prosperity. How lucky and happy they were, and how far away and almost forgotten were their unhappy experiences of Wednesday!

Again their day passed in happy work and pleasure. They found plenty of berries and filled their pails with dispatch. They swam and dove, ran races on the beach, skipped stones to tremendous distances, and then fished with unusual success. When their ambitions in that line were satisfied, they sat on the beach at the water's edge and cleaned and scaled several of the smaller fish, cooked them thoroughly in a frying-pan that Pewt had purloined from his mother's pantry, and ate a most hearty and satisfactory meal, with appetites that boys, and boys only, have. Then they rested, told stories, sang, imitated all sorts and kinds of animals and birds, and then, warned by the slanting eastward shadows, took up their full pails and started for home.

As berries were becoming a bit scarce, they felt justified in charging a cent more a quart for them, which made their receipts fully equal to their best day since they had become self-supporting. Arrived in town and their berries disposed of nearly half an hour before teatime, they took occasion to purchase a few trifles in the way of choice confectionery, which they heroically refrained from eating and put in their pockets for after-supper consumption.

After supper, very much at their ease, they strolled about town, patronized some of their boy friends, — whom they made very envious and therefore indignant by talking importantly of business prospects and the possession of great wealth; — hinted broadly of foreign travel in Kingston, Epping, Brentwood, and other distant lands; carelessly drew bills from their pockets and jingled their coin; commented on the misfortunes of the other boys in having to go to school the next Monday, while they were earning money in important business connections and seeing a good deal of the country; and as they did not divulge to their enviously admiring friends any of the actual incidents of the week, they made their erstwhile friends so disgusted with their superior airs that they jeeringly turned away and left the prosperous trio to stroll along with uplifted chins, not, however, unassailed by shrill opprobrium.

"Ho! huh! them three fellers feel pretty smart," jeered Fatty Melcher.

"Jest 'cause they got a leettle chink. Bet they hooked it of some one," said Gran Miller bitterly.

"Hi, old Plupy; howjer come out on 'The Lambaster'; who got nearly pulled in that time?" shrilled Pop Clark.

"How 'bout drivin' a swill cart for old Stebbins! Phew! keep away from me!" shrieked Skinny Bruce derisively, holding his nose; "pretty smart, ain't yer? Ho! ho! old Plupy and Beany and Pewt."

But the three boys answered in kind:

"Skinny Bruce, what's the use
To chew tobacker and spit out the juice?"

yelled Plupy; and then for Gran Miller's benefit quoted the immortal couplet mentioned by the elder Shute and ending in "Choo, Choo, Choo," followed by

"Gran Miller Tash, with his pockets full of hash,"

and,

"Granville Miller the barber, he went to shave his
father," —

which ditties had the effect of inciting Gran to frantic attempts to catch and destroy them, whereat they fled joyously, taunting him as they ran, and dodging the stones he picked up and hurled at them.

Indeed, it was a great day for the three boys.

But their fathers were literally up a blind alley, and could only trust in the hope that ill fortune, that so often smote the boys hip and thigh, would yet deliver them into their paternal hands.

"These little cusses are looking better every night. I'd no idea they could stick to a job like that," said Plupy's father despondently, as they met after supper to talk it over.

"Wal, George, I ain't so much s'prised as I might hev been. Ye see, them boys has allers stuck to their jobs ez long ez their jobs has stuck to them. When they run that 'ere paper of theirn they'd 'a' kep on a-printin' on 't 'f th' fellers they printed things about had n't ha' got mad 'n' made things lively fer them 'n' fer us. Ain't thet so?" demanded Brad.

"Thasso, Brad," said Wats.

"You're right, Brad," said Plupy's father.

"'N' ag'in, when they got up thet bill-postin' company, they done fust-rate fer a while, 'n' 'f it had n't been fer thet 'ere circus feller who got 'em to put up them 'ere picters where they did, they might ha' been a-postin' bills to-day 'n' makin' money," continued Brad, pushing a plug of tobacco into the extreme corner of his mouth and wrenching a quid therefrom.

"That's just about the way 't was," admitted Wats.

"I shall have to agree with you," assented Plupy's father.

"Then ag'in, they 'd ha' done well in carryin' papers ef Smith, Hall 'n' Clark hed done right by 'em, 'n' had n't druv 'em to strike fer decent pay. I tell ye, I stopped my 'News Letter' that day, 'n' I ain't never goin' to take it ag'in in my life," said Brad with conviction.

"Well, Brad," said Plupy's father, "I did n't blame the boys much for wanting more pay, but I did n't quite like the way they went to work to get it. They not only lost their job, but they prevented a good many people from getting their

Friday paper. But I guess they got hurt more than any one else. But you are right, Brad, about their sticking to their jobs. The thing now is to find some way to break them away from their jobs, so that we can send them to school. I can't just see my way clear to anything; that is, anything fair to them. Of course, we can change our minds, but with our agreement and understanding, I don't feel like doing anything that will make them think that we have broken our word. They accepted our promise, and have kept their word with us, and have worked like niggers cutting down a possum tree, and I tell you, gentlemen, it is a pretty serious situation. Those boys must go to school, but how we can bring it about without breaking our word to them is a problem. Perhaps something will happen, but I don't know what."

"Suthin' allers hez happened," said Brad happily.

"Every time, so far," corroborated Wats.

"Well, we'll hope for the best," said Plupy's father. And they separated for the night.

As the next day was Saturday, the boys thought they would introduce a little variety into their day's programme which would serve to prevent the regularity of their proceedings from becoming monotonous. During the course of the week they had used up their powder and most of their bullets in firing their pistol at a mark and in attempts at shooting squirrels and birds. While they had attained something of a mastery over the weapon when shooting freehanded or with a rest and at a mark or target, they had been utterly unable to hit any living thing. This had been something of a mortification to them, and they decided to put in a good part of the day in shooting. They had seen a cock partridge the day before, and they confidently reckoned on making it warm for him. So Saturday morning they rose early full of this idea, and after breakfast hurried downtown to purchase ammunition, and to save time bought their powder and bullets of Kelley and Gardner. They were somewhat inclined to go to Getchell's, and to try to get it on tick by apt reference to the letter of credit; but Plupy had an idea in the back of his brain that he had gone too far for the first time in charging the pistol, ammunition, and fishing-tackle to his father, and felt that he had better not tempt Providence too far a second time. So they divided the expense evenly between the three, took up their pails, and started for the lake.

Notwithstanding the fact that they had picked for five days from the supply of berries in this same locality, and had made serious inroads upon what seemed at first to be an endless supply, yet their fingers had acquired so great deftness that they filled their pails quicker than they had been able to do the first day out, and they realized that they would have to hunt up a new supply before many days. Yet they had no fear that they would fail to find an ample supply, and felt secure in the future. This day they were too anxious to try their luck with the partridges to think much about the berry-supply, although in their quest for game they meant to keep their eyes open for berries, with a view to profitable business transactions for the next few weeks. They also felt that later in the fall they could add wild grapes to their stock in trade and derive a steady income from it. Later on, they reckoned confidently upon a brisk business in ivory plums and partridge berries.

Indeed, like prudent and far-seeing business men, they had cast into the future the eye of shrewdness and foresight, although they had not discussed the matter exhaustively as partners should, and as they undoubtedly would do before the time came to act in concert. Certainly with an old cock partridge in the immediate neighborhood, which was supposed to be the mate of another plump bird and the father of a very numerous family of well-grown young birds, the boys did not bother themselves about the future.

As soon as they filled their pails, they loaded up the pistol and drew lots for first shot, which fell to Beany, who grasped the pistol and with the other two boys went sneaking, in Indian fashion, through the woods.

Soon a sharp "chirr" of a "redder" sounded above their heads and the boys froze like well-trained setter dogs.

"There he is, Beany, right over your head, on that branch. See his tail jerk? Let him have it," said Plupy in a hoarse whisper.

"Plug him, Beany!" said Pewt sharply; "plug him when he is face towards you."

Beany raised the pistol carefully and took careful aim while the little red varmint snickered and chattered. *Click!* the hammer came down, but the cap refused to explode and the squirrel darted away.

"Darn those old caps; they ain't no good," snarled Beany in deep disgust, recapping the weapon. Then the boys waited silently until the squirrel's curiosity overcame his prudence, and he stole down the trunk of the tree to within a few yards of the boys, where he set up a shrill snicker of contempt and ridicule.

Again Beany, amid the breathless silence of the boys, aimed the pistol and pulled the trigger. *Bang!* there was a report like a small cannon, a flash, and a cloud of smoke. The squirrel went over backwards and fell from the limb.

"I hit 'im! I got 'im!" shrieked Beany.

"You got 'im, Beany! You got 'im!" yelled the other boys in chorus.

But no, it caught a limb below, and with frantic gyrations of tail and body ran along the limb to the trunk, up which he sped like a flash of red lightning and disappeared in the tree-tops, as Beany, wildly excited, fired the second barrel into space in a vain endeavor to stop the squirrel.

"Gosh! I know I hit him," said Beany; "he'll crawl away and die somewhere," he continued, when suddenly, as if in refutation of his claim, from a distant tree there came a mocking "chir-r-r-snickety."

"Snicker away, you red-headed little cuss," said Beany balefully; "I'll get you some day."

Then it was Plupy's turn, and he carefully loaded both barrels and capped them with a careful selection of caps. It was really Pewt's turn, but he generously gave Plupy his turn, cunningly judging that two explosions such as Beany's shots had made would drive everything but a red squirrel out of the immediate neighborhood. Now, this wary woodsman thought that, by keeping Plupy from wandering far afield, he could probably confine his efforts as a marksman to another red squirrel or perhaps a saucy blue jay; whereupon he would take his turn, and he intended to strike for a distant part of the wood where the partridges would be likely to hide.

But as every sportsman knows, a partridge is likely to do the thing least expected, and in spite of the noise of the shots and the yells of the boys, this old cock, instead of decamping, waited until Plupy had finished loading, and then with sublime impudence walked out upon a huge log and stood calmly looking at the boys. Plupy gasped and stiffened and his jaw dropped in astonishment. For a moment he did not dare lift the pistol, then slowly it came up, but before he could fire the bird sprang into the air with a thunderous roar of wings. Plupy swung in the direction of the whirring bird, shut his eyes and fired wildly, and the thousandth chance won. There was a thump on the ground, a scuffle of beating wings among the ferns, and the boys flung themselves frantically on the convulsively bounding body of the plump bird, shot through the head. How the boys admired him, held him up and contemplated him from every angle, stroked his plumage, "hefted" him, and talked about him. But there were drawbacks to the perfect enjoyment of the other two boys.

Beany was sure that he could have hit him if he had had the chance, but then he "did n't never have no luck, nohow."

Pewt lamented the fact that he had been fool enough to give up his chance to Plupy, and taunted that gentleman with that fact, and claimed that Plupy could not do it again in a thousand tries, — in which he was probably correct. But nothing could dampen Plupy's joy. He had hit it once and that was enough.

Then Pewt took his turn at the artillery. In fairness Plupy had one more barrel to fire, but he did not press this claim, preferring to look at, carry, and admire his wonderful bird. For an hour they sneaked and peered and squinted from thicket to thicket. Once, in the deep woods, a partridge rose so quickly and with such a sudden and bewildering roar of wings that Pewt pulled the wrong trigger by mistake, and before he could shift his forefinger the bird was out of sight. This failure moved Plupy to make some remarks about how he did it, and he was grumpily told to "shut up" by the angry and disappointed Pewt. Finally, they came out on the shore of the lake, and there, in the water, within easy range and right before their eyes, floated a plump little grayish bird, — a diver or butterball, — with which the boys were unfamiliar.

"Gosh! Pewt, a wild duck; paste him," said Beany.

"Shut up, you fool; do you want to scare him?" growled Pewt.

Slowly and coolly Pewt drew up the pistol. He was really a far better shot than the other boys, and things looked bad for the pretty bird, that cocked its head and looked at the boys with its bright eyes.

Bang ! Spat went the bullet where the bird had floated a second before, but the bird had dived at the flash and disappeared.

"You've killed him, Pewt, and he's sunk," yelled Plupy, pulling off his shoes preparatory to diving for him.

Just then, a hundred yards farther out, the bird came to the surface like a cork and scratched its head with one foot. Again the pistol spoke and a bullet skipped over the water towards the diver, but without splash or whirl it disappeared. For a long time the boys watched. At last, far out on the smooth surface of the lake, it appeared again, and then slowly faded out in the distance.

The boys then found that they were hot, tired, and hungry. But first they went in swimming, Plupy carefully leaving the partridge where he could cast a protecting eye upon him; and as no boy in health can help having a good time while swimming, in a moment they were splashing, ducking, and diving in imitation of the escaped bird, and shouting with joy. While they were engrossed in this a pointed nose was thrust out of a thicket, two bushy ears were focused first on the splashing boys, then at the dead bird on the beach. The bushy tail twitched, the muscular legs marked time a moment to gain a purchase,there was a streak of yellowish red fur, a flash of white teeth, and the bird went into the wood with tremendous bounds in the jaws of a vixen fox, just as Plupy cast a glance towards his prize.

There was a wild yell of rage and despair from Plupy, echoed by the other boys, and a splashing, spattering race to the beach in time to see the old fox disappear like a flash over the brow of the incline towards the pasture.

Wild was the rage and profound the despair of Plupy. For a while he refused to be comforted, but by and by he allowed himself to be tempted to eat his lunch and yielded to his appetite, and after a good meal decided not to retire from the world or commit suicide.

As they had not taken any time to fish, they still had an hour or two to use up before their return; and when Pewt proposed that they fill their dinner-pails with berries, Plupy assented wearily — feeling that nothing mattered much since he had lost the partridge, and Beany, seeing the others at work and not liking to be out of it, complied with Pewt's suggestion, although with some reluctance. It took about a half-hour to fill their dinner-pails, and then they rested a half-hour and shot at a mark for practice, intending to make an early start for home, calculating that with the added weight of a full dinner-pail they could not make as good time as usual.

Just before they started, as Plupy was about to take a last shot with the pistol, Pewt suggested that he hold the muzzle of the pistol against a tree to see how loud a noise it would make. Plupy demurred to this, fearful of the consequences, upon which Pewt accused him of being scared. Plupy, jealous of his reputation for courage, walked to the trunk of a smooth maple, held the muzzle of the pistol firmly against the tree and pulled the trigger. There was a terrific explosion, a cloud of smoke, a grunt from Plupy, and when the smoke cleared away, Plupy lay on his back, his arms thrown over his head, his right hand clutching the grip of a pistol, and apparently lifeless.

The boys shrunk back in horror, and then rushed to his aid and raised him, dazed and wobbly, to his feet. It was some time before they ascertained that he was not seriously hurt, but a rapidly growing lump on his forehead showed that the force of the explosion and the recoil of the weapon had jerked his arm back with such force that he had hit himself a severe punch and had made a mouse on his marble brow. He was otherwise uninjured, but the pistol was a wreck; nothing left of it but the stock and the hammers.

Why the latter had not cut his head open is one of the mysteries that surround a boy's life.

The loss of the pistol, following so closely the loss of the partridge, almost robbed Plupy of his recuperative powers, and he became a pessimist on the spot. As they tramped homeward, the two other boys were so full of giggle over Plupy's mishap that they could scarcely conceal the cause of their mirth, which amused them still more. But not alone Plupy, but they themselves, were destined to be pessimists before the day was over.

X

THE CONSPIRATORS DETECT A RAY OF LIGHT THAT GENERATES HORRID SUSPICIONS

It was the custom of the good merchants of that day to send their weekly bills on Saturday to their customers,—I will not say victims of the system of credit then prevailing. The customer was supposed to appear at the store during the evening to pay the same and commence a new credit, and to dispute the bill should any error exist.

This made Saturday evening the busiest evening of the week. The streets were lined with farm-wagons, the sidewalks crowded with busy shoppers, the shopkeepers genial in the receipt of moneys and the exchange of commodities.

The boys had arrived home rather earlier than usual and had disposed of their berries for a good price. The receipt of the money had put Plupy in a better frame of mind, and as the mouse was beginning to turn black without causing him any pain, he was beginning to be very proud of the solicitude of the people he met and their open expression of admiration for the way in which he bore the pain of so serious an accident. In his delight in sympathy and admiration, he quite regained his good humor, although he occasionally put his hand to his head and feigned a grimace of pain.

As he knew to a certainty that if he went home his mother would put him to bed and send for a doctor, and as he did not want to go to bed and was not in need of a doctor's services, he decided not to go home until bedtime; and to his suggestion that the boys get their supper downtown, the boys at once agreed, as a fitting celebration of a week's hard and unremitting toil.

So they proceeded to Baker Davis's, near the American House, and invested in a supply of cream-cakes, cookies, jumbles, and other dainties of a somewhat questionable character, and which could be digested in large quantities only by boys of this age, and perhaps ostriches. With these articles in a brown-paper bag tied with white string, they retired to a suitable place near the milldam and ate a very satisfactory meal.

When Plupy's father arrived home that evening, he asked about his son, and was told he had not returned from work, which pleased him hugely, as he hoped the boys had experienced a very hard day. After supper he examined a number of bills that had been sent in, among which was a bill from J. Getchell, which he took up with a gleam of interest and a chuckle as he recollected how he had fooled the boys; but his grin faded away as he read: —

3 six-quart pails at 50 cts. $1.50

"Wonder what he used those pails for?" he queried.

3 dinner-pails at 50 cts. $1.50

"Those are all right, only a thundering price."

3 belts at 15 cts. 45

"Don't see what they want belts for."

Double-barreled pistol $2.00

"What in the devil?" he shouted.

Powder 28

"What does that cussed boy think, it's Fourth of July?"

Powder-flask and bullet-pouch 50

"Perhaps he thinks the war ain't over!"

Rubber Frog 15

"I'll rubber-frog him."

Hooks and lines 39

"If Getchell thinks I'll stand any such outrage as this, he'll find he has made the mistake of his life."

Total $6.77
Please remit.

"Six dollars and seventy-seven cents, please remit," shouted Plupy's father; "oh, yes, I'll remit all right. I wonder what he thinks I'm doing? Fitting out an expedition against Vicksburg or raising a company? Pails and belts and pistols and powder, eh! Where's the cannon and the cavalry horses and the shells and mortars and chain shot? Where's the ambulance wagon and the government mules? Gimme my hat!" he yelled, seizing the article, and clapping it on his head, and rushing out of the house.

So great was his speed that he nearly jumped over the heads of Wats and Brad, who were coming for a conference.

"What's your hurry, George; goin' to start the fire-alarm?" asked Wats jocosely.

"Th' ain't no fight or free lunch downtown that I heerd of, George, so ye better stop awhile," drawled Brad humorously.

"Look here, Wats; this is no laughing matter; look at this bill that Getchell sent me," howled Plupy's father, thrusting the bill before their eyes. "Two kinds of pails, pistols, powder and balls, bullfrog, fishing-lines and hooks. What in thunder is he trying to play on us?"

"'Us?'" said Brad; "I don't see how I come into this. I don't see any charge against me. This seems to be a bill against you."

"Nor me," said Wats, examining the bill carefully.

"Well, perhaps you may think so, but I tell you fellows that it concerns you more than you think. When I told those boys to go down to Getchell's to work, as you told me to, I gave them an order for their supplies, as they were afraid he might not be willing to give them what they wanted. Now, if this bill is right, these boys have hung us up for pails and belts and powder and shot and all sorts of Christmas presents, and I guess you'll find you are interested as much as I am, although your names ain't on the bill," said Plupy's father convincingly.

Upon this both Brad and Wats became very much alive to the danger, and suggested that they at once proceed to Getchell's and investigate the matter.

"Just going to do it. C'm on," said George shortly, and led the way with mighty strides.

Water Street was alive with cheerful bustle. People were coming from stores, laden with tea, coffee, sugar, calico, ribbons, kerosene cans with potato stoppers on the nozzles, salt mackerel, and dried codfish. Storekeepers were smilingly checking up accounts, receiving cash and checks, while their clerks were displaying goods, rushing from barrel to barrel with tin scoops, weighing the contents in huge tin receptacles on scales, and wrapping them up in brown papers secured by twine. In the stores and on the street people were gossiping in groups, while elderly men sat on benches in front of the places of business and discussed matters of local and national importance and spat thoughtfully.

It was a busy, happy village scene when the three parents, shoulder to shoulder, with determined, frowning faces, strode down the street and into one of the largest stores, known as Getchell's hardware store. They found the proprietor, a very tall, huge man, with a fine benevolent face with deep-set eyes peering through spectacles, sitting at his desk.

"Look here, Joshua," said George, "what is the meaning of this?" And he thrust the bill before his eyes.

The proprietor took the bill.

"H'm," he said thoughtfully; "three pails, three dinner-pails, pistol, powder, bullets, hooks, lines; h'm, I guess you must be thinking of going camping, or mebbe you've been, George."

"Camping be hanged," said George rudely. "What do you suppose a man of my age is doing, going camping? I have n't bought any of these things, and I won't pay for them."

"Well, if you have n't ordered them, you ought not to pay for them; but if you have, —well, that is a different proposition," said the proprietor smilingly. "Mr. Willis!" he called to the elderly clerk, "what do you know about this bill, it is in your handwriting?"

Mr. Willis, a man with a white chin beard, came forward, nodding smilingly to the three remonstrants, and looked up the bill.

"Oh, yes, I remember," he said; "three boys came in here a week ago, — no, last Monday morning, and gave me a note from Mr. Shute, — from you, George, — I put it on the book. Here it is," and he handed George his letter of credit to the boys. "You wrote that, I suppose?"

"Yes," admitted Plupy's father; "I wrote that letter and gave it to the boys. But the understanding was that Joshua here was to furnish the boys with whatever they needed to work for him, and I gave them the letter so that he might know they were all right. You remember that, Joshua, don't you?"

"Yes, I remember all that about hiring the boys, but as I never heard anything more from you or the boys, I supposed you had given up the idea or backed out. Why did n't you keep your agreement?" demanded the proprietor.

"Agreement! Keep my agreement! What are you talking about?" gasped Plupy's father. "Don't you know anything about your own business? Those boys have been working here all this week and coming home nearly dead every night. I guess you had better wake up." And Plupy's father laughed derisively.

"Well," said the proprietor quietly, "it may be as you say, George, and these boys may have been working here all the week without my knowing it, but I generally know every one who works for me, and I don't believe I have got out of the habit yet. How is it, Mr. Willis; have we had any new boys working this week?"

"Th' ain't nary boy been round here that I've seen, not a one, Mr. Getchell. I sh'd ha' known it ef th' hed been," said Mr. Willis decidedly.

The three fathers gazed at one another in speechless amazement. Finally, Plupy's father recovered his speech.

"Well, I'll be gin-fizzled!" he ejaculated.

"Did you ever see or hear tell of such boys?" said Wats, addressing the universe generally, in a tone of conviction that admitted of but one answer.

"I dunno's I ever did," replied Brad, assuming the duties of the universe, but with characteristic caution leaving a loop-hole to escape through.

"Have you seen these boys on the streets this week; perhaps they have made a mistake and went to Kelley and Gardner's instead?" suggested George, clinging to a straw.

"But they would n't have bought their supplies here if they had n't understood they were to come here," said Mr. Getchell, preparing Plupy's father for the worst.

"Oh, I don't know; they might have thought they could go to either place," continued George, still clinging to his straw, feeble though it seemed.

"But I know they have n't worked either for us or for Kelley and Gardner, for I have seen them on the streets two or three times this week with a fine string of fish," said Mr. Willis, pulling the straw from under George and ruthlessly letting him down.

"Fish!" thundered Plupy's father, glaring at the other two.

"Hooks and lines, thirty-nine cents," quoted Wats in querulous tones.

"Rubber frog, fifteen cents," groaned Brad, in a tone of shrill conviction.

"Pistol, two dollars," continued Plupy's father. "Say, Willis," he continued, "they must have shot something. Did n't have a moose or deer, bear or catamount?" he inquired with fine sarcasm.

"Wal, ez to that, I hearn 'em talkin' with some other boys 'bout shootin' a partridge, 'n' a fox gittin' it, but I s'posed 't wuz just boys' talk," replied Willis with a tolerant grin.

"This 'ere thing must be looked inter," said Brad grimly.

The three men turned as one and strode out of the store, forgetting to salute the proprietor and his friend.

"Wait a moment, George," said the proprietor; "you forgot to pay that bill."

"So I did, Joshua; hang the bill, anyway," growled George, pulling out a leather pocketbook and loosing a long strap, and he paid the bill and joined his friends, and they strode away up the street shoulder to shoulder like Dumas' three guardsmen; Wats, debonair, eagle-beaked, with mustache upturned at the ends, and glistening side-whiskers, the gallant Athos; George, tall, broad-shouldered, and good-natured, impersonating the gigantic Porthos; and Brad, dignified, sardonic, the able and astute Aramis. As they walked up the street, glancing neither to left nor right, people gazed at them in astonishment. Something must be seriously wrong, indeed, with these men, when the ordinary courtesies of life were not forthcoming, — the genial smile and jolly nod of George, the courteous inclination and hand-wave of Wats, the dignified salute of Brad. "What can be the matter?" said the mystified peasantry.

Suddenly the three men met the objects of their search in front of the town hall, strolling along at their ease. The three fathers gasped with surprise to see their offspring so little affected by the hideous secrets in their small bosoms. But inexorable duty spurred them on, and they shrunk not. Advancing, George seized his offspring by the collar, to that lank youth's unbounded amazement; Brad took his boy by the ear with such vigor that he lifted him from the ground so that he stood on tiptoe on only one foot and his face was drawn awry with a hideous grimace of pain, astonishment, and uncertainty lest the ear give way; while Wats grasped his graceless son by the scruff of the neck as one takes an offending cat.

"Where have you been this week and what have you been doing?" growled George between his teeth.

"That's what we want to know," said Brad, lifting a few more pounds.

"And we're goin' to find out," hissed Wats, rattling Beany's teeth with a sharp and vigorous shake.

"Blueberryin'!" gasped Plupy.

"Pickin' bloo-ow! ow! ow! — berries," said Pewt, out of the lower corner of his mouth, the upper corner having followed his ear, stretched to the breaking-point.

"Pup-pup-pup-icking bub-bub-bub-loo-bub-bub-erries," stuttered Beany, as his head oscillated from side to side and the syllables came out in staccato jerks.

People passing stopped in amazement, and Plupy's father recollected himself. He released his son.

"Now we will go to Brad's shop and settle this matter once for all. You boys march ahead and we will follow," he said with authority.

Brad released Pewt, whose one-sided features settled gradually into place, leaving only an expression of complete mystification. "March!" said Brad with military terseness.

Wats allowed Beany's head to cease its oscillations. "You travel!" he said succinctly.

The boys traveled, wondering what the trouble was, but not daring to express any opinion in regard to it. The three parents followed, shoulder to shoulder.

"I wonder what those three little devils have been at this time?" said one person.

"Don't know," said another; "hope they will get what they deserve this time."

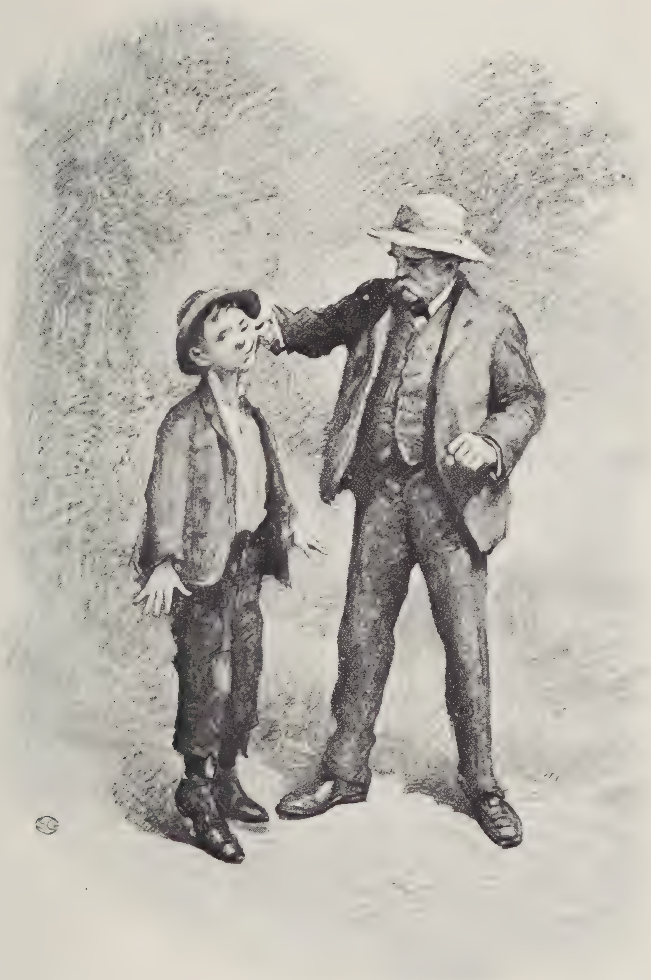
"Pretty bad boys, I am afraid," said a third regretfully.

"Yep," said a fourth; "they ought to have been killed or sent to jail years ago."

On marched the three worst boys in the town.

Their fathers followed in the guise of Nemesis, — three of her, in fact.

They arrived at Brad's shop, opened the door, and entered. The three fathers followed, closed and locked the door, and lit the lamp. In the dim light of the kerosene filtered through a red flannel wick, their faces looked stern and unforgiving, as



PICKIN' BLOO — OW! OW! — BERRIES

ready to do exact justice. Their sons' faces expressed bewilderment, but little fright, for they were sustained by a sense of right. "They had n't done nothin'."

Plupy's father began proceedings. "Now, you young rascals, I want to know —" he exploded, when Wats cut in, "Before I tan the hide offen you, Elbridge —" when they were interrupted by Brad.

"Now, George; now, Wats; just lemme talk to 'em keerful 'n' quiet like. You fellers get too excited. We gotter use some judgment 'bout this; not blow up like steam b'ilers."

"You're right, Brad; we'll leave it to you," said Plupy's father.

"Go ahead, Brad; we'll keep quiet," said Wats.

"Now, then, boys," said Brad, "what we wanter know is how come ye to go blueberryin' stidder goin' to work, th' way we told ye tew. Now, tell the truth on 't 'n' p'r'aps we may be a leetle bit easy on ye."

"Why," said the boys, "Mr. Shute told us to go, 'n' so we done it."

"You infernal little liars!" began Plupy's father in great wrath, when Brad interrupted him with dignity.

"Look here, George; I thought ye was a-goin' to lemme settle this 'ere thing."

Plupy's father restrained himself with difficulty. "Go ahead, Brad," he said, somewhat sulkily; "and you boys tell the truth if you know what's good for you," he said warningly.

"D' ye mean to say, Clar'nce, thet George Shute told ye to go pickin' blueberries and fishin'?"

"He did n't say nothin' 'bout fishin', but he told us to pick berries, 'n' blooberries is berries, ain't they?" said Pewt, aggrieved; "ain't that so, Plupy; ain't that so, Beany?" he demanded of the other two boys.

"Yes, he did, too," said Plupy and Beany in unison, casting reproachful glances at Plupy's father.

"Of all the infernal —" began George, but Brad cut him short with a wave of the hand, and a "Now, *Mister* Shute," and George subsided.

"And old Shute — I mean Mr. Shute — told us to go to old man Getchell's and get what we wanted, and give us a note and we done it," continued Pewt; "ain't that so, fellers?"

"Yes, that's so, Pewt; he done it," shouted the boys in corroboration.

"H'm," muttered Brad, casting an expressive look upon Plupy's father, who was with difficulty restraining himself from springing upon his accusers and destroying them.

"Wal, 'f he gin ye a note to git supplies to go a-blueberryin', whadger git a pistol fer?" adroitly cross-examined Brad, "hey? Whadger git a dangerous 'n' deadly weepon fer?" he repeated, feeling that he had his witness in a corner.

"Well, Plupy done that," said Pewt, at which George gave a convulsed start and glared balefully at his son.

"Hum; so Plupy done it, did he? Wal, whadger gotter say 'bout it, Plupy?" demanded the inquisitor, turning to Plupy, who colored with embarrassment at having the matter thrust upon his shoulders.

"Well, I — that is, I kinder thought, 's long as we was goin' to work in the woods, that p'r'aps we might meet a bear or a tramp or suthin', 'n' p'r'aps we needed a pistol to protect ourselfs; 'n', ennyway, they is bears sometimes round blueberry patches, sometimes," he continued earnestly.

"Wal, 'f George told ye ter go blueberryin', whadger go a-fishin' fer?" queried Brad.

"Why," said Pewt, taking upon himself the burden of answering the last question, "we thought you would n't mind, 's long 's we filled our pails first, 'n' we did every time; did n't we, fellers?"

"Yes, we did," assented the "fellers."

"Whadger do with the berries?" pursued Brad.

"Sold 'em to old man Conner's store," answered Pewt.

"Whadger do with yer fish?" persisted Brad.

"Et some 'n' sold the rest to Oliver Lane," said Pewt readily.

"How much money did ye get?" asked Brad with deep irony.

"I got six dollars 'n' fifteen cents."

"'N' me, too," said Beany.

"'N' me, too," chipped in Plupy.

The three fathers looked amazed, whereupon the boys displayed their wealth.

"Now, fer the life of me, I hain't the leastest idee why you boys went blueberryin' when you were told to go to work for Getchell. Th' ain't no mistake, is they, George?" Brad asked, turning to Plupy's father in bewilderment.

"No, sirree!" said George; "I told them as plain as I could that they were to learn plumbing."

"That's so," said the boys, wagging their heads in vigorous assent; "that's just what he said 'n' that's just what we done."

"But what has blueberryin' got to do with working in a tin-shop?" demanded Brad indignantly.

"But he did n't say nothin' 'bout workin' in no tin-shop," chorused the boys; "he told us to go down to old man Getchell's to get what we needed to go a-plummin'!"

"But what's blueberryin' got to do with plumbin'!" snarled Brad impatiently.

"Why, darn it all, father," said Pewt, in disgust and desperation, "ain't it plummin' to go 'n' git blueberries or raspberries or ivory plums or candy plums or any kind. What's the matter with you? We done jest as he told us to, 'n' we ain't had no thanks for it, 'n' we —"

But he got no further. Once before George's hearty laugh and keen sense of humor had saved the situation, and again he broke out, "I'll be gin-fizzled if these little devils won't be the death of us, Brad." And he roared in paroxysms of laughter, while Wats slapped first one leg and then the other, tottered to the side of the room and doubled up until the tears ran down his face, and Brad, leaning back in his chair and opening his mouth until his eyes were tightly closed, cackled with delight like a hen.

Long they laughed until the boys began to grin and finally to laugh from the contagion. At last, from sheer inability to laugh longer without breaking something necessary to their raiment or welfare, they stopped and explained matters to the boys, and then, telling the boys to remain a moment, they went out to discuss the matter. It required but little discussion, for they were delighted at the turn things had taken, which gave them an opportunity to conclude matters very much to their satisfaction and the welfare of the boys if not their wishes in the matter. Then they returned, after certain moneys had changed hands, and Plupy's father explained to the boys kindly that the whole affair had been an unfortunate misunderstanding; that they appreciated the good intentions of the boys, the fairness and faithfulness with which they had carried out their part of the agreement; but that, as the agreement had been misunderstood by both parties, each and all of the contracting parties were relieved from any further obligations under it.

"But how 'bout goin' to school; don't we git out of that?" demanded Pewt, aggrieved.

"No, boys," replied Plupy's father kindly. "We cannot in fairness to you let you quit school. It may seem hard to you now, but when you are older you will realize that we are doing the right thing by you, and you would never forgive us if we did otherwise."

"Huh!" said Pewt, in deep disgust; "that's what they all say after they has got through school 'n' ain't got to go any more."

"Huh!" grumbled Plupy.

"Huh!" groaned Beany.

"But in consideration of your hard work, we will let you have the money you earned, but we must have that pistol," he continued. "Where is it?"

"It's busted," said Plupy; "Pewt stumped me to hold it against a tree 'n' fire it, 'n' I wa'n't goin' to take no stump from nobody, 'n' I fired it 'n' it blew up 'n' hit me this lick in the head." And he pointed to his mouse, which had gone down perceptibly, but was still quite in evidence.

"For Heaven's sake, don't you ever think?" snorted Plupy's father in disgust. "I s'pose if he had stumped you to jump into the river, you would have done it, would n't you?"

"I might ha' done it if he'd stumped me," said Plupy, hanging his head.

"Well, boys, let the pistol go, but we will take the pails until —"

"Until you go plummin' again," said Brad.

"Huh!" said the boys, with deep feeling.

XI

THE COUNTY FAIR

AND so as fate had ordained and the three fathers planned, the boys went to school the next Monday. They went with some reluctance, for they had talked and bragged a good deal to their friends about quitting school for good and all, and they felt sure that these friends would have a bit of fun at their expense. But they were, even at that day, skilled politicians, and knew well that a "pull" with the higher powers would help them mightily, and they proceeded at once to prepare this pull.

There were several boys somewhat their superiors in age and very much so in fistic ability. These were Scotty Brigham, Tady Finton, and Jack Melvin. To have offered or given either of these boys a bribe to thrash any one would have brought on the giver an immediate "lickin'," but a proffer of dainties as a matter of friendship brought about a sort of defensive alliance that might at any time become an offensive one, so narrow is the distinction in the case of armed neutrality among nations and schoolboys.

And so by this judicious distribution of small portions of their store of refreshments they became in high favor with these juvenile Heenans, and after several sarcastic youths had been caught and severely "lammed" by these gifted pugilists, and the three boys had themselves conquered in battle some shrill but insignificant enemies, they found going to school again was not half as bad as they had feared.

Then again the tale of their adventures at the lake, and in particular the stirring relation of the sinking of the boat, the long swim of the boys which had been magnified into a two-mile swim, and the rescue of Beany in the last stages of exhaustion, as well as the shooting of the cock partridge "bigger'n a turkey gobbler" and its rape by a fox, were themes that earned them a fearsome reputation.

And so with the advent of the football season, the pea-blower season, and the season of bone clappers, the month of September passed in peace and plenty. Then in early October came the great event of the year, — the Rockingham County Fair. To us who attend the huge Agricultural Fair of to-day, with its interesting but abominable Midway, its magnificent array of blooded stock, its splendid racing and horse show, its automobile and aëroplane death-daring, its wonderful demonstration of farm implements and machinery, the old-time fairs may seem of trivial importance.

But no. In our boyish vision the old Rockingham County Fair, held in Exeter in the 'sixties, was the most marvelous exhibition ever held on the American continent, its exhibits the most gorgeous, its horse-racing the most exciting, its pulling-matches with oxen, its ploughing-matches with oxen and horses, the most stupendous contests ever dreamed of. Why, how long would an automobile truck of one hundred horsepower stand up against old William Conner's string of three yoke of Hereford oxen under the goad? "Huh!" and again, "Huh!" — with an accent of utter contempt.

What of the pacing record of 1.58¼ as against the 2.39¼ of some of the trotters and pacers of the 'sixties. Well, I guess if the modern trotters and pacers were put on the little half-mile track in Exeter in the old days, beside old "Sheepskin," with Wake-up Robinson in the sulky, or with Scott Locke behind "Nellie," or Ben Adams behind "Old Regulator," where would the modern pacers and trotters be? "Tell me that, fellers; jest tell me that! Huh! Well, I guess! Huh!"

It was, indeed, a great time. The course of years has brought us the World's Fair in Philadelphia in 1876, the Chicago Exposition of 1893, that of Buffalo in 1901, of St. Louis in 1904, of Seattle in 1909, and one is projected for San Francisco in 1915; but where are they in comparison with the old Rockingham Fair on the Gilman Field in Exeter, New Hampshire, U.S.A., in the 'sixties. Where are they, I say? And again, "Huh!"

The old town was in the throes of preparation for weeks before the event. The field of afternoons was alive with teams working on the grounds. The track was leveled as far as practicable and the grass mowed and all refuse raked up and burned. The fences were repaired; new posts put in and all freshly whitewashed. The sheds were repaired, and put in good shape; new booths erected for the exhibition of cattle, horses, sheep and swine, and fowl; ground broken for the pulling-matches, and countless other tasks performed. As the grounds were surrounded by a high board fence, and as every year numerous peep-holes were excavated by small boys who were unable to get in, and who with great ingenuity knocked out knot-holes and made apertures by pulling out decayed parts of the boards, naturally a great amount of work was absolutely necessary to put this bulwark in such condition that not even the prying eyes of the non-paying patrons of the fair could penetrate its secrets.

Then there were hay, grain, and stubble to buy for the ruminants; the judges' stand to be reinforced with additional props to its weather-beaten, spindly, and tottery legs, so that the hoarse gentleman with the huge black mustache who leaned out of his eyrie and occasionally bellowed "Go!" — but more often rang a large dinner-bell to a procession of wildly scrabbling horses — and his companions, who compared watches at the end of a race and wrangled unseemly, might not come to everlasting smash as did one Humpty Dumpty. All this, done under the eyes of the small boys, did much to whet their ambitions for the future and to distract their attention from their daily school tasks.

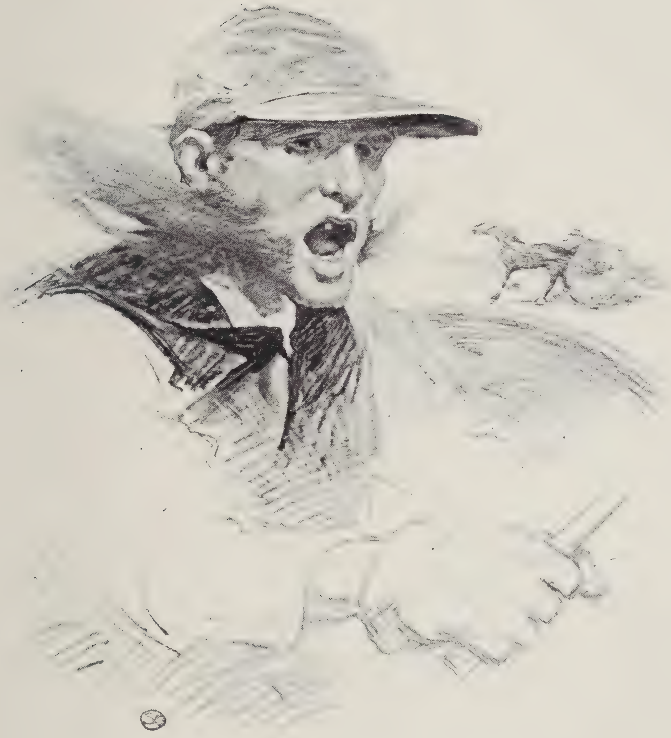
As the day of the fair approached, strange people began to arrive. A grimy individual with peaked cap, driving a rangy, gamy-looking animal in a prodigiously high-wheeled sulky, under which dangled a pail, a roll of blankets, an extra whip, and a pair of rubber boots, attracted immediate attention as a famous driver of an equally famous trotter or pacer. A diminutive, bandy-legged gentleman in topboots, much too large for his skinny legs, mounted on a flat saddle strapped to a giraffe-like equine, the rider's knees on a level with his ears, and his head sunk between his shoulders, bespoke some well-known and daring jockey with a runner in a direct line of descent from "Flying Childers." And for a week or more the boys gathered at the track before and after school, on the chance of seeing these gentlemen fly round the track on a practice spin with these wonderful animals.

Happy the day and fortunate the youth who could get the coveted opportunity to lead around a blanketed horse in the cooling-out process after a warming-up heat, or who could carry water for, or hand brushes or currycombs to, the drivers who acted as grooms, trainers, and rubbers-down to their skinny charges. At about this time the local horsemen began to put on fearful and wonderful costumes and to drive through our streets at highly irregular gaits. To see old "Wake-up" Robinson astride a two-story sulky coming down the street behind "Old Sheepskin," so called because of the heavy sheepskin padding he wore on breastplate and breeching, his driver's long black whiskers streaming away behind and over its wearer's shoulders, his peaked cap with long visor pulled down over his eyes, and his wide grinning mouth emitting his hoarse war-cry from which he derived his nickname "Wake-up," was a sight for the gods.

On this occasion that eminently dignified and respectable storekeeper, Henry Dow, at the "Sign of the Big Boot," an immensely tall and dignified man with a crest of long hair that reminded one forcibly of a blue jay, daily climbed aboard an unusually tall and spindly sulky and held the "webbings" over a dappled, switchtailed pony of not over fourteen hands, which gave him the appearance of driving a sheared sheep, and jogged him up the street to the track.

Even that pillar of the Advent Church, the venerable Nathaniel Churchill, could not refrain from exercising his smooth roadsters in a road-cart or four-wheeled skeleton wagon, although his religious scruples and strict puritanical upbringing did not allow him to indulge in horse-racing. Indeed, he did not even attend the fairs to witness it, although the struggle between his perfectly natural desire and his religious views must have caused the good old man untold suffering. And as he was unquestionably the best horse-breeder and judge of horses in the county, and possibly in the State, it was a great pity and a loss to the town, and to him, for he had some real horses.

The track upon which these memorable races were held was peculiar in several respects. In the back stretch there was for several rods a hollow where the road fell away rapidly, then as rapidly regained its level. Beyond this for fully one hundred yards was a dense growth of scrub pines that effectually concealed the progress of the horses from the anxious gaze of those financially or otherwise interested in the race, which added to the delightful uncertainty of the contest, and made the choice of a favorite a most hazardous



WAKE-UP ROBINSON BEHIND OLD SHEEPSKIN

pursuit. Indeed, horses having a record in the thirties, and on that account acclaimed as sure winners, ofttimes came in disgracefully in the rear of two-forty-five trotters, and were lucky if they were inside the distance flag.

It came about in this way: A horse driven at top speed at a trot or pace, suddenly dipping into the hollow, was thrown out of its stride, lost its legs, and had to gallop to keep from falling. If by any possibility the horse was sturdy and steady enough to hold his stride when going downhill, he was practically certain to lose it coming out of the hollow. So it became the practice of the drivers on approaching the hollow to loosen their reins, stimulate their horses by a cut of the whip and a loud yell of encouragement, take both slopes at a furious gallop and trust to luck and skill to pull their horses to their stride just before they came out of the woods and into the gaze of the hoarse gentleman with the enormous mustache, and of his horsy friends who compared watches at the finish.

In this way a horse that could gallop might, although far behind at the dip, arrive at the home stretch in advance of a much faster and steadier trotter or pacer, and stand an excellent chance of winning the stakes. This led to many protests on the part of drivers who claimed that they were designedly fouled by rivals, and much unseemly language was indulged in by participants in the races which led to fist-fights, in which the whole neighborhood of the finish-line became embroiled.

Again, the strain on the fragile and ofttimes rickety wooden sulky wheels was very great at the rise from the dip, and occasionally splintering crashes were heard, and from the shadow of the woods bounded frantically kicking horses, driverless, and attached to one-wheeled and splintered sulkies, and followed at a distance by limping and swearing men, who on reaching the judges' stand raised their hands to high Heaven and invoked curses on their successful rivals. Indeed, a horse-race at the old Rockingham Fair was a thing of powerful uncertainty, and of an attractiveness far superior to anything of modern times, and the populace crowded to see and occasionally to take part in some of the exciting phases of the sport.

Then, there was the slow race, where to insure the utmost speed possible and to prevent each owner or driver from trying to win the race by driving his horse as slowly as possible and taking up the greater part of the day in accomplishing a mile, each man entering a horse had to drive his rival's horse and have his own driven by the rival, and each man stimulated his rival's horse to his utmost speed in order to win the race by beating his own horse.

This also created a deal of interest; and as each man literally lambasted his rival's horse, the finish of the race frequently brought the drivers into fistic collision as they viewed the welts on their damaged plugs. However, no professional training was necessary for this race, unless it might be training of a pugilistic nature which was of the greatest possible assistance.

For many evenings before the opening day of the fair, the Exeter Cornet Band practiced with hideous intonation and terrific *ensemble,* which was the sweetest possible music to the boys, who, with troops of others, spent their evenings in and around the high-school yard chasing, dancing, wrestling, yelling, and jumping fences and straddling posts, while the band, aloft in a back room of the old town hall, long since abandoned as the seat of the municipality, and the home of Torrent No. 3, collared and threw such masterpieces of music as the "King John March," "Shoo, Fly, Doan Bodder Me," the "Washington March," the "Mulligan Guards," and other *fortissimo* selections.

Plupy, however, was always present at these rehearsals, but never joined in these mad scenes of riot and jollity. Instead, he sat on the stairs of the band room, as near to the door as he could get, and drank in this flood and tempest of sound as one entranced. Poor boy; he was born with a most intense love of music, and thought a bandsman a being far higher than a governor or even a president. He had for a long time been trying to earn and save money enough for a cornet, but, being of a convivial and somewhat self-indulgent nature, had drawn on his fund so frequently that it had never risen to a point of accumulation at which the purchase of a cornet was remotely probable. But these rehearsals, far exceeding in number the regular weekly rehearsals, made another element in the popularity of the fair.

Rooms at the various hostelries were engaged in advance by gentlemen in high boots, paper collars, false bosoms, and detachable cuffs. Stall-room for horses was bespoken. The clerks and proprietors of the Squamscott (Major's), the American (Levi's), and the Granite House (Hoyt's) became bustlingly active, affable, and polite. The saloons, long since defunct, thank Heaven! had laid in heavy supplies of fiery and controversial liquors and were confidently reckoning on a heavy business.

Morning and night the hopeful farmer curried and rubbed down his pet cow or brood mare with colt, viewed his mammoth squash, his elephantine pumpkin, apoplectic apple, or blushing peach. Daily the thoughtful wife watered and coaxed her brilliant asters, braided her rugs, and consulted the cookbook and her neighbors for effective recipes for bread, pastry, and culinary dainties, — all for exhibition in the "Ladies' Department." Octogenarians recalled their choicest tales of "ye olden time," and had mother overhaul their broadcloth coats, their stovepipe hats, and gray woolen trousers. Octogenarianesses sewed the thirty-five hundredth patch of dimity or silk or calico, and "nary one alike," on her patchwork quilt, and confidently awaited first, second, third prize, or honorable mention.

The daughter of the house painted astonishing pictures in most amazing colors, or wove "God Bless Our Homes" in rainbow hues, and drew astounding animals in black and white, which she labeled for identification as a matter of convenience to the judges. The scholars in the public schools prepared writing-books, with a variety of ennobling sentiments, in the finest and most elaborate of long hand, while the drawing-teacher took down from the wall of his room the pen-and-ink sketch of an impossible deer and an equally fabulous bird of paradise that had cost him prodigies of penmanship and marvels of careful erasure.

Indeed, every kind and condition of men, women, and children were vitally interested in this fair and looked forward to its event with the greatest of pleasurable anxiety. The old fair was like the game of golf: every one who desired could play it with satisfaction. Unlike that game, every one wished to play the fair, and did; and with that condition of public sentiment, what wonder that our three boys were well-nigh crazy with delight.

The schools were to have a three days' vacation, the life of the fair. Inasmuch as the entire Prudential and School Committee were either officials of the fair or exhibitors, and the honored principals of the high and grammar schools were enlisted as marshals, and entitled to wear the crimson sash and to brandish the baton covered with gilt paper and further embellished with ribbons, as a badge of authority, and as most of the female teachers had charge of the school exhibit of writing and compositions, a vacation was absolutely necessary, and the matter had been accomplished with a great deal of tact, diplomacy, and finesse on the part of these shrewd instructors.

The afternoon before the fair was almost as interesting as the first day. Bronzed and hardy farmers led immaculately clean cows through the streets, blanketed in gay colors, with "Maud," "Genevieve," or some other endearing or descriptive name stitched in scarlet on their gaudy coverings. Occasionally in the haste of preparation the blankets were accidentally changed, and one might see a savage-looking bull led through the streets with the name "Annie Laurie," or the legend, "This animal gave thirty-two quarts of milk in one day." Or a line-back "mooley" might bear the embroidered name of "Prince Edmund." These were purely accidental errors; but a painful lack of a knowledge of history was betrayed when the proud owner of a huge bull named George Washington advertised him in glaring blanket capitals as the father of a long line of distinguished progeny, and an equally proud exhibitor of a noble cow had named her Queen Elizabeth, and on her blanket was a declaration that she was the dam of three pairs of twins within three years.

There were tents containing a two-headed calf, a horse with five legs, an educated pig, and an armless man who could write his name, or for that matter any person's name, with his toes (there were no Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, or Armenians in America in those days), and would do so for a consideration. There was, of course, the living skeleton, his companion, the pinky-white fat woman, and the dreadful bearded lady, the sleeping beauty whose bosom rose and fell rhythmically as long as Jimmy turned the crank. There was a long, polished case on wheels, with small peep-holes of polished magnifying glass, through which holes, at the modest price of one penny, you gazed enthralled upon colored prints from the then very recent war of the rebellion, with which you were probably familiar from the pages of Harper's or some other magazines, but without the coloring and enlargement. Pie and coffee stands, lemonade booths, ginger-pop stalls, and counters for the serving of plain beans and brown bread were knocked together of pine boards and tenpenny nails.

It would require a book to tell the various attractions, exhibits and amusing episodes of that fair. They were crowded into three days, and it was, indeed, three days of thrilling enjoyment for the boys, and Plupy was especially fortunate in securing a season ticket in this manner: Charles Taylor was an official of the fair management, occupying the position of commissary-general to the livestock department; that is, he was the official purchaser and distributor of the hay, grain and roots, straw, and other provender for the various kinds and conditions of animal in the fair; and as such he was a very busy man, and to facilitate his rapid transit he had borrowed of his particular friend George, Plupy's little mare, Nellie, the very animal with which Plupy and the politician had made that speed record but disastrous trip to Hampton Falls. This loaning of the horse gave, as may be supposed, peculiar privileges to Plupy, which that youth extended, whenever possible, to his two cronies, Beany and Pewt.

It also transpired that the use of Nellie by the worthy commissary furnished a good deal of excitement for our friends and for the patrons of the fair, and a great deal of embarrassment to the book-makers and betting men. Nellie was quartered in the horse-sheds with distinguished company, having a stall of her own and other furniture necessary to the comfort of a race-horse, to which she had not been accustomed, but which she took to like a duck to water; for one of the grooms and rubbers-down of the trotters and pacers daily rubbed, curried, bandaged, hot-watered, cold-creamed, massaged, and in other ways testified to his appreciation of certain forbidden favors extended to him by the good-natured but designing commissary.

In this way, and with generous feeding, the little animal was ready to jump out of her skin with spirits, and as she darted down from place to place on her errands with the commissary she attracted much attention by her good looks and her rapid gait. She was a bit tender in her fore feet for pavements, which circumstance had brought her within the range of Plupy's father's modest pocketbook; but care and the soft country roads had practically cured her, and a week's care by an expert stableman had worked wonders.

There were races during the afternoons of the three days, which races commenced at two o'clock and were generally finished by five, unless dead heats rendered an extra heat or two necessary to a decision. Beginning with the lower-class horses, the 3-minute class, the 2.48, the free slow race. The second-day card was the 2.44 and the 2.40 class and the pacing race for stallions. The third, which was the great day, offered, as a climax programme, the 2.36 and 2.30 trots and the free-for-all, with a purse of $175 — with $100 for first, $50 for second, and $25 for third horse. In this free-for-all any one, who fancied his horse and could raise an entry fee of ten dollars, could take part in the race; but, as the purse brought out the best horses, it was seldom that a really mediocre horse was started. Indeed, it occurred not infrequently that a horse that had previously trotted in a low-time race, not previously holding a fast record, would make it extremely interesting for the favorites, and render the long-shot men in the betting correspondingly jubilant at the close of the race. It was this that made the free-for-all the race *par excellence* of the fair, and the nerves of the book-makers and betting men exceedingly banjoey during the heats.

The days had passed in a riot of good times for the boys, whose appetites were insatiable. The good old town had an air of demoralization.

paper littered the streets leading to the grounds. Unfortunates without legs sat on the pavements and ground hideous and unfinished symphonies on tiny box-organs: I can distinctly remember some of these tunes after a lapse of over forty years. Demoralized county sports leaned against posts and spat and swore. Marshals in gaudy sashes clattered up the streets. There were village cut-ups with their girls promenading with red balloons and riding-whips bound in blue and crimson-paper ribbons. A man who could play phenomenal cornet solos on a tin-tunnel, including the "Wood-up Quickstep," called crowds to his broad platform, where he sold them bottles of cure-all warranted effective for all ills ranging from bunions to religious controversies. The town hall was the theater of the horticultural, patchwork, tidy, and art exhibit, and the steps were littered with peanuts and the remains of countless lunches. The governor had arrived, and was escorted to the fair grounds by the band and a detachment of veteran soldiers and the entire force of marshals in a champing, curveting line. The crowd was immense; the two races had been trotted amid great excitement; and the final race of the day, the free-for-all, was called.

Just before the last heat of the previous race, Plupy, who had accompanied a sweating trotter to the stables to see him rubbed down and cooled, — to him an interesting sight, — and to drink his fill of the spicy and instructive remarks of the stableman, overheard something that filled him with an idea almost too big for him to grasp. One of the rubbers, incensed at the poor showing of his charge, profanely allowed to his mates that he would be blankity blanked if he could n't take that little bay mare, Nellie, and clean out half the racers in the stable. Plupy gasped at the brilliancy of the idea that suddenly struck him, and he edged nearer the group.

"Say, that's my horse you are talking about; d' ye s'pose they would gimme a chance?" he asked.

The grooms laughed and said, "Any one can enter a horse for the free-for-all that can raise ten dollars for the entry fee."

Plupy gasped at the enormity of the amount, sighed at the recollection of his depleted cornet fund, and his jaw dropped in despair. Had he known this at the opening of the fair, he and Beany and Pewt could have pooled their possessions and have made up the entry fee; but, alas, to quote again from Dumas' immortal hero, "Nothing remained but bitter memories."

But the groom suddenly came to his assistance. "Look here, fellers, what's the reason we can't dress this young feller up in a driver's suit and cap, hook up the mare, and have him drive in with the rest? The chances are that nobody will know the difference, and he may get a chance. Whadger say?" he demanded.

It is not my purpose to record here just about what they said. It was exceedingly profane, but very much to the point. Would the little feller do it? The little feller would, and rapid preparation began. Plupy was invested with a spotted shirt, a yellow cap with an immense visor, a whip, and a pair of gloves, all of which were much too large for him. The cap in particular rested on his ears, the generous spread of which prevented him from being totally eclipsed. In fact, he looked like a suit that had been discarded and thrown into a corner. As he desired above all things to escape recognition and expulsion, this was very much to his taste. Meanwhile the grooms instructed him in the code of the track.

"You'll hafter take th' outside, the farthest horse from the pole horse. In turnin' to score, allers turn to the left. Don't let yer hoss break at the line, or ye'll be sent back. It don't matter if you are a bit behind at the start; you can make it up with a good horse; but don't start ahead of the pole horse or they'll ring you back. 'N' if you git a chance to pass a hoss, don't cut in ahead of him unless you are at least a length ahead or they'll protest you. Mind this; don't git the pole behind a leadin' hoss, or you'll git in a pocket."

"What's that?" asked Plupy.

"Why, it's this: If you git behind a hoss at the rail, 'n' another hoss gits on your right, there ain't no way to git out 'nless you jumps over or pulls yer hoss back 'n' goes round 'em, 'n' yer can't do neither 'thout losin' the race. Unnerstan'?"

Plupy understood.

"'N' one thing more; don't try to beat everybody the first time round, 'n' don't let go of yer hoss when a driver runs by yer. Runnin' don't count, 'n' no feller can run by the wire a winner. Th' only place to run a hoss is when you get to the dip; run her then, but take her down to a trot as soon as you get outer the dip. Some of the green drivers run their hosses until they come out of the woods, 'n' by that time th' hoss has got into his runnin' stride 'n' it's hard to pull him down, 'n' a square trotter may beat him out at the finish.

"Now, don't get excited. Talk to your horse quiet like. Th' other drivers will yell like Indians 'n' try to make yer mare break. Just 'tend to keepin' yer mare straight, 'n' when you come outer the woods th' second time round, put for the wire as fast as you can 'ithout makin' her break. Now, don't be a bit afraid; they can't do no more to ye than takin' yer outer the race, 'n' I guess ye'll git one heat trotted, ennyway. There goes the bell now. Wait till most of 'em gits out. Sorry ye ain't got time for a warmin'-up heat, but 't won't be safe.

"There goes old Wake-up Robinson with 'Sheepskin' 'n' Benson with 'Flyin' Cloud,' 'n' Nealey Travers with 'Billy Boy,' 'n' old man Dow with that dock-tailed pony; beat him, ennyway, whatever you do; 'n' hello! there's Jim Flanders with 'Rex.' You'll do well if you can get inside the distance with that hoss. He's flighty 'n' if he gets nervous, Jim can't keep him on his feet. Go ahead now," said the groom, who had been examining the harness and sulky while talking, loosening a strap here, tightening one there, pulling the sulky back to see that the little mare had breeching room. "Go ahead." And giving Plupy a last instruction to keep cool and keep his horse cool, he gave him a clap on the shoulder and the little mare a pat on the flank, and they were off.

To this day Plupy has never forgotten his intense pride and fear as he trotted on the track in company with these great drivers: pride in his horse and in his own importance and fear that he might be detected and humiliated before the crowd, and in particular fear that his father, who with his sisters was in a row of seats, the predecessor of the grand stand of later days, might recognize the horse and him and publicly lambaste him. Knowing, however, that Nellie, in her strange harness and vehicle, looked unfamiliar and like a rat, and feeling that he looked like nothing else under the sun, he hoped not to be recognized.

As he drove to the scoring-line, there was a laugh at his ridiculous appearance, but admiring comments on his horse, and something in the gait of the little mare at once caught the crowd.

"Go it, Tom Thumb," bellowed a big voice to the small boy.

"Don't let 'em break yer hoss, scarecrow," shouted another.

"Look out for old Wake-up," continued a third.

Plupy nodded and grinned, but his heart was thumping so loudly that he could hear it, and there was a lump in his throat that nearly choked him to death. Then the bell rang, the mob of horses started with a rush for the wire, and with them charged the little mare, pulling double. Plupy was behind on the outside, but Rex broke, and the bell rang. Plupy pulled and talked the mare down and turned her, nearly colliding with Sheepskin and earning a hearty curse from old Wake-up.

As they came back to score, Plupy's father, whose eye had been caught by Nellie the moment she entered the track and who had been staring intently at her, suddenly recognized her and her driver, and hurried out of the stand and rushed towards the track shouting to his metamorphosed son to "come out of that."

He was too late, however, for the bell rang, and with a rush they started for the wire, just as Beany and Pewt, with eyes standing out a full inch, shrieked, "Plupy! Gosh! It's Plupy," and jumped up and down in excitement.

The horses in an unbroken line swept by the wire. "Go!" bellowed the starter.

The crowd cheered. It was a start. Sheepskin had the pole, and at once took the lead, closely followed by Flying Cloud. A half-length behind, with his nose at Flying Cloud's saddle, came Billy Boy, with the Dow dapple about on a line and a full length behind, and on the outside came Nellie and Rex, going like clockwork. Along the first half the dapple gave way to the little mare, who came up to Billy Boy's throat-latch, with Rex even with the mare, and Rex's driver grinning good-naturedly at the boy.

"Steady she is, lad," he cautioned. "I'm goin' to win this race if Rex is not too cranky; but do your best; don't let your horse get away from you at the dip."

Plupy nodded and watched his mare. The

wind was singing in his ears and he was tingling all over.

They were at the dip, and the horses took it at a furious gallop, Plupy keeping well to the outside for safety and anxious not to unduly excite the mare, and had her going steadily fifty feet beyond the dip, passing Billy Boy, whose driver had trouble in pulling him down. Meantime Rex had left the mare, was rapidly overtaking Flying Cloud and Skeepskin, going like a machine with a beautiful stride, and they passed the wire the first time down with Skeepskin a nose ahead of Rex, who was rapidly overtaking him, Flying Cloud at Rex's wheel, and three lengths behind came Plupy's little mare, leading Billy Boy by a short head, while the dappled pony trailed four or five lengths in the rear.

The people yelled encouragement.

"Go it, you little devil!" roared one man leaning over the rail.

"That's the boy for you!" shouted another.

"Steady!" shouted the groom; "keep her steady; don't let 'em break her!"

Pewt and Beany cheered shrilly, "Go it, Plupe! Put on the whip! Beat old Whiskers!"

Plupy's father waved frantically, forgetting his scruples as he saw how the game little mare stuck to the leaders.

One hundred yards from the wire on the first quarter of the second lap, Rex put on a burst of speed that left Skeepskin and Flying Cloud in the rear, and the little mare lost a half-length in the spurt which the gray made to keep up with Rex, but gained a half-length on Billy Boy as that trotter felt the strain of the pace.

Then Rex went off his feet in a tangled break, and before he reached the dip was passed by both the gray and Flying Cloud and went down the incline neck and neck with Billy Boy, whose driver had driven his horse to a gallop a good hundred yards from the dip and had passed Plupy's mare, to the speechless dismay of Beany and Pewt and of the crowd, whose sympathies were with the boy and the gallant little horse.

"Nealey's too much for the boy; beat him by a trick," said one.

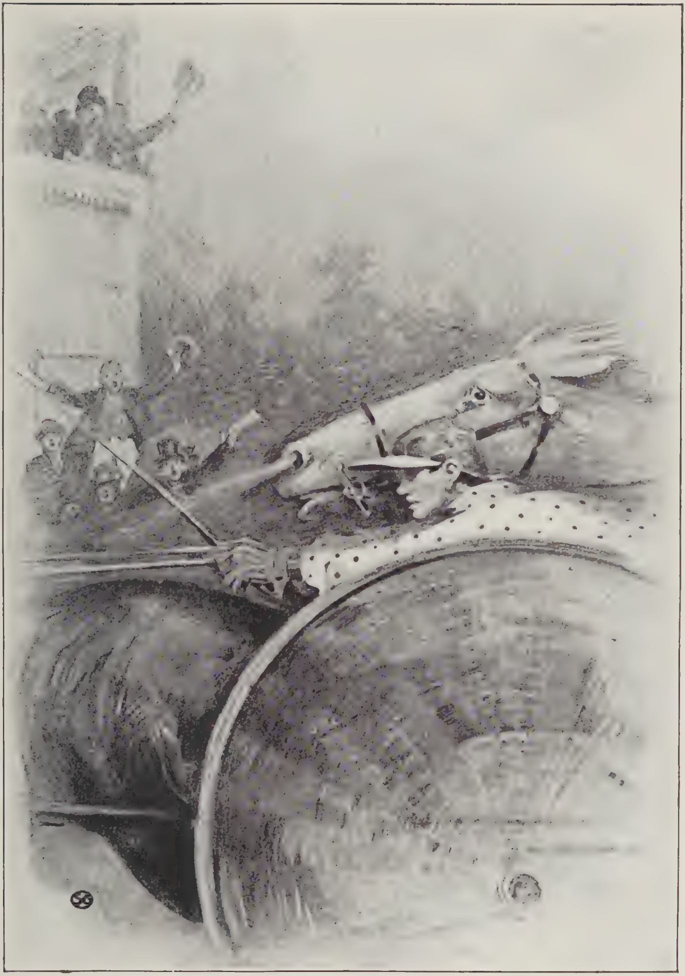
"Too bad," said another; "I thought the little cuss might have a chance, but he don't know the ropes like an old-timer."

"He'll be out of it before they get out of the woods. Watch out now," as the whistling of whips, the yells of the drivers, and the rapid beat of flying hoofs were heard. "Here they come," yelled hundreds of voices, and the crowd rose to its feet in excitement as the horses burst out of the woods, Sheepskin a length to the front, its driver leaning forward, plying the whip and yelling his war-cry of "Wake-up, thar! Wake-up, thar!" in a voice like a fog-horn, while at his wheel was Flying Cloud going like a whirlwind and Benson yelling like a demon, neck and neck with Billy Boy, whose gallop had rested him and whose driver cursed and whipped as the trotter went off his feet. But what was this? For still on the outside two lengths to the rear and two hundred yards from the finish came a little bay mare with her neck stretched forward, her trim ears laid flat to her head, her mane flying, and her slim legs going like piston-rods in a wild engine, while on the sulky, with hair flying and cap gone, eyes blazing and shrill voice encouraging the mare in a high squeaky falsetto, sat Plupy.

The crowd went wild. Shouts, shrieks, bellows of encouragement, and hoarse directions were showered on the driver. Beany and Pewt yelled like ones possessed, while the groom leaned over the rail until he held on by his eyelids.

She has passed the plunging Billy Boy; she is up to the Cloud's wheel, to his flank, his saddle, she creeps up to his throat-latch; she is by him, a head, a neck, a half-length; she is clear, and has lapped the big gray fifty yards from the wire.

The driver's whiskers stand out straight behind him; he sees the little bay head at his elbow, and down comes his whip on the gray again and again. He yells and swings his whip, wildly



SWEEPS ACROSS THE WIRE A LENGTH AHEAD

trying to break up the little mare; but he might as well try to stop the flight of time. She reaches his saddle, then his shoulders, and then with a mighty burst of speed passes him and sweeps across the wire a length ahead.

How the crowd roar and cheer! The groom comes rushing into the ring and unchecks the little mare, blankets her, and gives her a mouthful of water. She is dripping, and her nostrils are dilated and her satin skin a network of throbbing veins. Other grooms rush in and shout profane congratulations to Plupy, who is in a daze of delight. He can scarcely believe it true. He has beaten all these race-horses in a real race. Nellie has done it, and both he and Nellie are famous.

"Gosh!" he exclaimed in amazement. "Gosh! We done it."

But as the grooms led away the horses, in front of the judges' stand the drivers, headed by old Wake-up, wrangled profanely, and protested against the race.

"That mare hain't entered, 'n' wa'n't on the score-card, 'n' ain't got no right to be in the race," barked Wake-up hoarsely, brandishing his whip.

"Shut up, Whiskers," said a man in the crowd; "you're mad 'cause the little feller beat ye!"

"I can beat that mare ten lengths in the half-mile and distance her in the mile, 'n' I'll do it, too, if she is entered fair and square," yelled Wake-up, his whiskers bristling with rage.

"Ah-h, you could n't beat a stone boat hitched to oxen with that old crow-bait," shouted another; "why don't you give the boy a chance?" And the crowd cheered and groaned.

"I'll pay the entry fee," yelled a man, pulling out a roll of bills, "and I'll back that mare and the boy for anything any one wants to cover." And he flourished his bills at the crowd amid cheers.

"I protest; 't ain't reg'lar; th' mare had oughter been entered before the race; I protest," yelled the driver of Flying Cloud to the judges.

"Don't blame ye; I'd do it if I hed to drive thet ole caliker plug of yours," yelled another in the crowd, at which there was a shout of laughter.

"We gotter drive hosses 'cordin' to the rules," barked Wake-up.

"That's a durn sight more'n you ever did, ole furze brush; ye tried to break up the boy's hoss when he was passin' ye. *You* drive 'cordin' to the rules! You never did that in yer life," said another angrily.

"What do you say, Flanders?" some one asked the driver of Rex, who had said nothing.

"I say, give the boy a chance. I'll beat him if

I can, but I'll beat him fair. And I'll pay his entry fee if none of his friends will," said Flanders, with a good-natured grin. "The boy 's all right, and the mare's all right, and I say, give 'em a fair chance at the purse."

"Good boy!" yelled an enthusiast; "that's what I call square."

"Give the boy a chance," shouted the crowd, jostling and crowding around the judges' stand. "Give 'em a chance," they roared, "or we'll pull the stand down."

"Gentlemen," roared the big-voiced starter, "this race is goin' to be on the square, whether you pull the stand down or not. I'd like to see the boy win, but he did n't enter his hoss before the race, and he can't do it after one heat. The protest is sustained."

"Aw! Pull him out of the stand! Give us a fair judge. Call off the race," roared the crowd, surging towards the stand.

Things were looking very bad for the judges and the drivers when Plupy's father, who had been making a hurried but devious passage through the crowd of people and carriages, jostled his way through the jam in front of the judges' stand.

"Look here, gentlemen," he said, facing the crowd; "hold on just a minute. I've some interest in this matter. The boy is mine and the mare is mine, and I'm not going to allow my boy to drive another heat. I did n't enter the mare, and did n't know anything about it until I saw her in the track. I came here to see the race and I believe in it, but as long as my boy is under my authority, he does n't drive race-horses. When he grows up, he can do as he pleases, but not now."

The crowd was variously affected. Some applauded, some hissed, some groaned.

But Flanders shouted, "Gentlemen! the boy's father is right and the judge is right. Better let the race go on. I want to get Mr. Robinson's scalp, myself," he added, grinning broadly, at which the crowd cheered and laughed uproariously.

"One word more, gentlemen," said Plupy's father. "If Mr. Robinson is anxious to see a race, I'll put up a hundred dollars against his fifty that I can step into the sulky and beat him with that little mare, one heat, best two in three, or three in five, and I never drove a race-horse in my life."

"Ah-h-r-r!" sneered that gentleman; "you could n't raise a fifty cents."

"Could n't, eh?" said Plupy's father, pulling a wad of bills out of his pocket and flourishing them before Wake-up's face. "That money was earned honestly and not by pulling good horses or throwing races. Now, cover it if you dare, and bring out your horse. Only you'll drive fair for once, you old whisk-broom, you; for if you try any games with me, I'll not only beat you, but as soon as the race is over, I'll pull you out of that gig of yours and dust this whole track with that old stable-broom you wear on your face." And he thrust his fist full of bills so close to that bewhiskered gentleman's face that he took several quick steps backward.

This time there was no question about the applause. The crowd yelled with delight and jeered the discomfited driver as he hastily strode to the stables without covering the bet. Whereat Plupy's father grasped his staring and open-mouthed son by the hand, and said, "Come, hurry up, get out of that infernal rig of yours, and don't you ever do that again as long as you live." And they hurried to the stables, followed by Beany and Pewt and a train of retainers, where they found the groom hard at work on the mare.

When told of the decision, the groom was exceedingly profane, and allowed there was no justice in this world anyway.

But for the glow of winning this heat, Plupy would have been bitterly disappointed in not securing a part of the purse; but after the race, in which old Sheepskin and his driver were disgracefully beaten, not only by Rex but by Flying Cloud and Billy Boy, to the huge and outspoken delight of the crowd, Flanders, the good natured driver, sought him out and gave him a five-dollar bill and several hundred dollars' worth of good advice in regard to racing.

"Keep out of it, boy. Horse-racing never did any man any good. It leads to drinking and card-playing and gambling. I'm making money now at it, but I'm going to quit it as soon as I can. This may be my last race. I hope so, for I've seen too many men go to the devil with it. The saddest thing in the world is a broken-down driver, and they mostly become broken down before they quit. So promise me you'll keep out of it, boy." And he offered his hand.

Plupy promised, and shook on it; a promise, I am glad to say, he has kept to this day.

XII

THE COLOR LINE

Eeny, Meeny, Miny Mo,
Carpe negrum digito,
Sin' exclamat relinquo,
Eeny, Meeny, Miny Mo.

THE five dollars, so generously given by the driver, put the boys' finances again in good condition. Plupy first got the bill changed into specie, as seeming much more tangible and easily handled, and, putting a part of it away in hoard to make good the depletion of his cornet money, kept the rest for daily use. So much in those days could be bought for a few pennies that the sum he reserved for his daily needs should have lasted a long time. Still, arrow-rifles were expensive, costing fifty cents each, and arrows costing five cents each are easily lost and very fragile. Pea-blowers, although not expensive, cost something, as well as the other necessaries of life; that is to say, sling-shots, dime novels, B. B. shot, — really one of the vital necessaries, — glue and paste, kite twine, white mice, tin whistles, box traps. So it was not long before poor Plupy began to feel the pinch of dire poverty.

Beany, who was a spendthrift of a gastronomical turn, was also in financial straits. Pewt, who was of a somewhat thrifty turn of mind, always had money, and always wanted more, and so he was eager to embark in any scheme of industry or adventure that promised a fair return.

They had long since decided that they could dispense with fame. Fame always seemed to entail heavy responsibilities. It seemed a precursor of misfortune. Had they not obtained both fame and comparative fortune on several occasions, and had not fame robbed them again and again of their fortune and deprived them of their advantageous business connections? Away with fame! Hereafter they would follow fortune. Henceforth they were practical utilitarians, and had their eyes open for opportunities.

They were willing to work to a reasonable extent, but not to become dull plodders. The different lines of industry that had known them had offered marked opportunities for adventure. In several the extent of these opportunities had been undreamed of by them. Dull, plodding, uninteresting toil had no charms for them. Perhaps that was the reason why they never attempted to secure engagements in sawing or chopping wood. Indeed, it was only through stern parental command that they could be prevailed upon to do such tasks at home.

And so to those who knew and appreciated their peculiar qualities, it may have been inexplicable that these three boys should go into the charcoal delivery business. In those days the charcoal business flourished exceedingly in the fall of the year. Large vans were seen on the streets every day, heaped full of charcoal, and generally drawn by emaciated plugs that seemed cruelly overloaded until one reflected that charcoal was one of the lightest substances in common use. These vans were driven by gaunt and hollow-cheeked men, so sooty and blackened that their nationality was known only by the fact that they were so much blacker than negroes.

Charcoal was then as much of a household institution as soft soap. To-day both substances are but little known. Charcoal was obtained by burning wood — usually birch, beech, or some other hard wood — in kilns or mounds from which the air was excluded, something, I imagine, on the principle of the fireless cooker of modern times. The result was that after days, if not weeks, of steady but retarded combustion, the fire died down from sheer sulkiness, like a small boy who feels himself unappreciated, leaving a mass of intensely black charcoal.

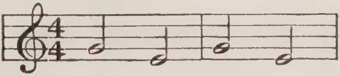
A charcoal-man always exercised a subtile fascination over the boys. He smelled of the woods; also quite strongly of a black clay pipe which, in contrast to the Stygian blackness of his acquired complexion, seemed of a soft gray color, and in which he smoked the strongest of nigger-head plug, a very appropriate name under the circumstances. This tobacco burned very freely and sent out vast clouds of rich blue smoke. It is probable that, as the tobacco was ground fine between the horny palms of the charcoal-man, it acquired additional fuel from the acquired complexion of the same, and there is a fascination in watching the workings of a free pipe in the mouth of a worthy citizen.

Then, again, charcoal-men were generally good-natured and light-hearted. They lived a sort of hand-to-mouth, free-and-easy life. Far from the haunts of man, sometimes a mile or a mile and a half afar, they burned their wares in huge piles covered with turf and earth.

Their chief occupation during the incubation of these huge piles of carbonized brands from the burning was to sit cross-legged on a log or rudely fashioned seat, in front of a shanty of unplaned boards, smoking, at times rising lazily to throw a shovelful of earth on the mound to quench a growing and impudent blaze, and at times to take down a muzzle-loading, single-barreled shotgun and to disappear in the woods at a loping, wolf-like trot, to return after a short absence with a partridge, a cottontail rabbit, or a gray squirrel or two. It was a wild, free, healthful, but not particularly remunerative life from a financial standpoint. Still, it had its undeniably good points.

A charcoal-man did not have to wash; did not have to undress nights; did not have to wear collars or cuffs or neckties; was not obliged to black his boots on occasions of state; could "sass" a man any time he wanted to, because no "feller" wanted to fight with a charcoal-man any more than he would with a man who had smallpox or measles or cholera or scarlet fever, or any other contagious disease.

In addition to this he could "holler" louder than any other peddler. Any one can "holler" "Charcoal!" twice as loud as he can "Pie apples," or "Glass put in," or "Old rags," or "Fresh strawberries," or "New potatoes," or "Umbrellas to mend." Try it and see. Indeed, the musical and far-reaching cry of



always seemed to the boys the triumph of musical acoustics.

What wonder, then, that the charcoal-man was a favorite institution for the country town and country boys! And then his wares were in universal demand, and so cheap as to be within the reach of all. Did a man wish to purify his well-water, he used charcoal. Did he wish to asphyxiate a cat, dog, or hen that had outlived the usefulness accorded to such animals, he used charcoal fumes in a confined space. Did he wish to cure his pigs, stricken with mortal disease, it was to charcoal he turned.

At morn he rose and kindled the fire in the coal stove with charcoal; and if he observed the rules of health and cleanliness, he cleaned his teeth with charcoal. Did an enemy oppress him or say evil things of him, he scorned to pour coals of fire on his head, but during the silent hours of the night wrote charcoal calumnies upon his white-painted fence or barn.

Yes, charcoal was a power in those days, and the charcoal-man an institution without which, and without soft soap, I shudder to think of what the country towns would have become.

I have already said, I think, that Wednesday and Saturday afternoons were half-holidays. If I omitted to say this, it was a serious omission for which I apologize.

It speaks well for these boys that they were willing to sacrifice their half-holidays to their business and utilitarian instincts. Half-holidays were generally sacred to football matches on the Academy grounds, and between evenly divided bodies of numerous students. It was the custom of the town boys to view these contests from points of vantage and to howl their small heads off in the excitement of the game.

Then it was the time of the annual migration of smelts and frost fish up the river, and the wharves were crowded with fishermen industriously catching these delicious fish, and thereby earning the gratitude of their relatives and indulging in the pleasures of the sport. Yet, in spite of these powerful attractions, we find these three boys, clad in old clothes, with artificially darkened complexions, riding on a huge charcoal van and piercing the echoes with hideously musical cries.

They were disappointed in one thing: a piece of charcoal is a very poor projectile. It is too light, very much too light, and the most vigorous throwing arm can do but little with a piece of charcoal as a missile. It has further drawbacks. Unlike an over-ripe cucumber or tomato or turnip, it will neither squash nor spatter. Unlike an aged egg or deceased cat, it will not diffuse horrid smells, and render the person struck a temporary outcast from society. Nor does it raise welts, bruises, or contusions upon the hapless victims of its flight. In fact, a piece of charcoal falls short, in many particulars, of being a handy missile of offense or defense, as any boy of spirit and experience can readily see.

And so, when our friends took service with the charcoal-man, they were under no illusions in the matter. But they were not unaware, and from much experience, that the charcoal of commerce and daily use was about the best article on the market for the making-up of nigger minstrels, and that during the nigger minstrel season it was extremely difficult to obtain any of this indispensable article, either by purchase, entreaty, cajolery, or grand larceny, and they were boys of marked foresight.

Their duties consisted in advertising their employer's wares by hideous competition in the variety and piercing quality of their yells, and in loading huge baskets from the cart and unloading them into sheds and cellars under the watchful eyes of housekeepers and of that variety of man that stays at home and putters around. It was not very hard work, for the substance was very light, and as the poorest sort of knotted, twisted, and bent wood is generally used in the manufacture, it does not readily shake down in a basket, and what may appear to be an immense pile of charcoal, when reduced to its least common denominator, — to borrow a phrase from our old-time common enemy, Mr. Colburn, of arithmetic infamy, — may be a poor thing and a pitiful.

Indeed, Plupy, misled by the bulk of the first basket-load he was to deliver, put so much strength of endeavor into lifting it that he threw the whole load not only over himself, the sidewalk, and the toiling Beany, but earned a sharp cut over the legs from the stout cane of an indignant old gentleman whose gray woolen trousers and blue high-collared coat he had plentifully showered with the dusty and very insinuating material.

However, it was his baptism of fire, and having indelibly blackened himself almost beyond recognition, he plunged into the business with an ardor that greatly commended him to his employer, which, while it enabled that gentleman to do nothing more than drive the horse and collect the money, earned Plupy such encomiums that Beany and Pewt became jealous, and competed so furiously with him and with one another that in a short time it would have been an impossible task to distinguish either boy from the blackest of black little negroes, and the entire load had been distributed.

Then there was the delightful ride to the camp, the loading of the team, the examination of the shanty, the speculation as to how many partridges and rabbits the gun had shot, and whether or not it might not have given the death-shot to deer, bear, and catamount. Then came the ride back to town on the load, during which the charcoal-man sang in a very hoarse, charcoaly sort of voice, a stirring ballad about one Sally, who was adjured by the sooty vocalist and admirer to

"Come up, come down,
Come twirl her heel around," —

and offering her encouragement to the effect that

"The old man has gone to town,
Sally, come up in the middle," —

to which the boys listened with breathless interest and attention, although the eccentricities of the melody grated somewhat on Plupy's musical ear.

All that afternoon and until long after dark the boys worked, growing blacker and blacker as they became more heavily coated with coal-dust. On the second trip to the shanty, they ate their lunches, which they had prevailed upon their mothers to put up for them, and the charcoal-man cooked some sausages over a fire, which sausages they thought tasted better than anything they had ever eaten in the whole course of their lives. The charcoal-man also made them some tea, which they drank in huge gulps, just as he did, and pronounced bully, although, as a matter of fact, they did n't particularly like it.

But the tea and the hot sausages braced them up very much and enabled them to get through the rest of the afternoon with a great deal of credit, for they had worked very hard and were tired and sore. But under the combined stimulus of food and drink, good-fellowship and cheerful song, they worked up to the limit of their strength and earned generous praise from their employer, and what they valued more, — for they had learned that too extravagant praise is only too often a base substitute for more solid reward, — fifty cents for them to divide, and a promise of further employment on the following Saturday.

After their sooty friend departed on his empty van, the boys found the evening before them. They were so densely black that their first thought was to wash off the stains of labor. But the impracticability of that course was at once apparent. The swimming season had long since waxed and waned, and the water in the river was so cold that the thought of a bath in it set their teeth chattering. It was not bath-night at home, that day in the week when, after the supper dishes were washed and put away, the largest family tub was brought into the warm kitchen and filled with warm water. Beside it was placed a crock filled with soft soap. Coarse roller towels were hung over chairs, and coarse wash-cloths were draped over the sides of the tub, while beside it stood the mother of the victims, her sleeves rolled to her shoulders, and her form draped in a blue apron that reached from neck to heels, and wearing rubbers on her feet.

It was not fun; it was "*peine forte et dure*"; it was martyrdom; it was a relic of barbarism; it was worthy of the Spanish Inquisition; it was — well, there are no words sufficient to describe it. Mothers were so particular about one's ears and scalp and neck. Then they kept on scrubbing after soap had got in one's eyes and nose, and when they used the towels they nearly scraped the skin off a "feller."

And although it was not bath-night, the boys reckoned with certainty that, were they to venture home before their tired mothers had gone to bed, bath-night would be at once declared, a special one in which drastic torments would be inhumanly employed to restore the boys to their normal condition of comparative cleanliness.

No; the boys knew better than to go home, and naturally sought to get as much enjoyment as possible out of their unusual condition. With this laudable intention they sought to lay violent hands upon such of their acquaintances as they felt they could lick, and by embracing them ardently to leave as much black sticking to their clean hands and faces and neat suits as was possible under the circumstances.

This was great fun, and they persisted until they made such nuisances of themselves that they were threatened with arrest by Constable Swain, whereupon they made themselves exceedingly scarce, but not before they had printed indelible proofs of themselves on numerous and unfortunate acquaintances.

Driven from the lighted avenues, they sought the more secluded streets, and began that delightful pastime which consists in hiding behind a tree and springing out upon the unwary pedestrian with horrid outcry and appalling grimace. As the usual effect of this was to terrify the victim almost out of her senses, — as from motives of prudence the trick was only tried upon women and girls, — it was looked upon by the boys as an exciting and amusing trick, but was really one that should have been rewarded with a sound thrashing or a term in the Reform School or House of Correction.

There was an element of danger in it, as they found out; for, as they pursued their way down Elliot Street, the scream of terror of a victim brought a man out of a doorway like an avenging angel, and had he not been blinded by coming out of a lighted room into the darkness of the street, they might not have escaped. But as they had a fine start and knew the avenues of escape, they led him through devious ways until his wind left him and he pulled up panting and vowing vengeance on those infernal niggers.

Their escape and mistaken identity delighted them beyond measure, and pursuing their way they came out on Front Street, and, rightly judging themselves safe from further pursuit and detection, they again concealed themselves behind trees and waited a victim. They had not long to wait before a tall woman with swinging, mannish tread came down the street, and the boys were obliged to stuff their hats in their mouths to stifle their laughter that would bubble out as they contemplated the convulsive start and agonized shriek of the woman when suddenly confronted with the three outrageous little blackamoors.

But there seemed to be a slight discrepancy between the result, as they had calculated it and as fate had arranged it. The result would cause no surprise to any citizen when it transpired that the lady for whom they had so kindly and thoughtfully arranged this little surprise party was a widely known and respectable scrubwoman of great length, strength, and activity, who "feared no foe in shining armor," neither man, beast, bird, fish, nor reptile. She was half-Indian, was double-jointed, flat-chested, long-armed, and lean-hipped. She could see in the dark like a cat, had a sense of hearing as delicate as that of a hound, and had instantly detected the presence of some one behind the trees and was ready for him.

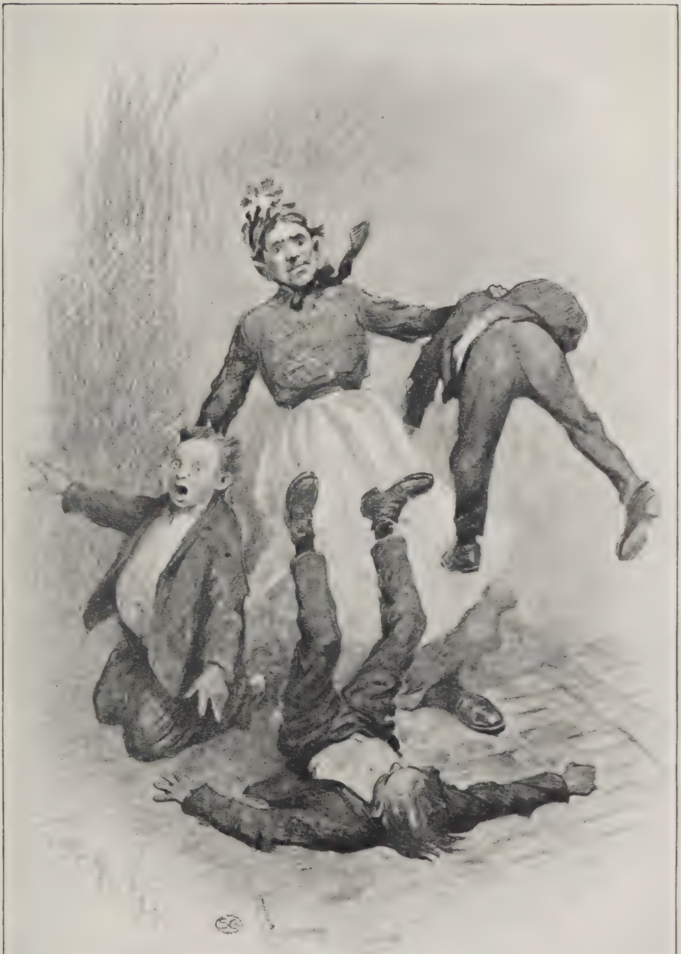
On she came, leaning forward slightly, stepping lightly, her corded hands opening and shutting like the claws of a bird of prey. The boys, who could not see her fell preparations for action without betraying themselves and spoiling the joke, waited until she was nearly abreast of the trees behind which they were concealed, and suddenly sprang out with wild yells of glee, which abruptly turned to shrill cries of pain and terror; for as they sprang she was on them like a tornado, and for a few minutes there was a whirlwind of small sooty figures around a central axis of vituperative amazon. She slapped them to the right, she boxed them to the left, she threw them against each other like bags of old clothes, she threw them to the ground, she pulled them up by the hair, she tore their clothes, she shrieked imprecations at them, while they yelled with terror.

Had they been white boys, they would have gotten off lightly; but they were niggers, imps of blackness, sooty little devils, and she, as a member of the two superior races, hated niggers with a deadly hate.

Something clinked on the sidewalk, and in spite of the noise, which was attracting the attention of the people in the neighboring houses, she heard it, and in spite of the darkness, she saw it. It was a half-dollar which had not been divided and consequently had not been spent. She dropped the boys and dove for it, and they went over the fence and away like cats escaping from a bulldog.

The wondering neighbors came out to see what the matter was, and a crowd gathered. The virago explained volubly that three niggers — miserable, pesky, dratted, sticky little niggers — tried to scare her and she whaled 'em good. If they had n't dropped a half-dollar, she would have been whalin' them still. But a half-dollar was "wuth" all the niggers that "wuz ever borned," and it was "putty doin's if a respectable widow woman could n't go along the street without bein' insulted by a passel of niggers." The crowd cordially indorsed her opinion, and rural quiet stole over the little street.

Far away under the thick screen of kindly bushes, Plupy, Beany, and Pewt in bated breath discussed their situation, compared their bruises, and alternately shivered with dread and listened. Everything was quiet, but for another half-hour they lay there until the nine-o'clock bell rang from the belfry of the old church, and then, knowing full well the dire consequences



A WHIRLWIND OF SMALL SOOTY FIGURES

of being out after nine, they stole homeward, slipped in the back way, and skillfully avoiding the notice of their parents crawled into bed, so bruised, tired, bewildered, and so depressed over the loss of the half-dollar that they could scarcely wait to undress, and totally forgot about their condition.

The next morning their mothers, going to the chambers of their respective hopefuls, uttered loud shrieks of dismay when they beheld what they thought was a small colored boy soundly sleeping in the dirtiest, dingiest, blackest bedclothes they had ever seen. But being courageous women, they made prompt investigation, and soon laid bare the secrets that their sons would fain have hidden.

Will the boys ever forget the domestic upheaval that ensued? The scrubbing with soft soap and hot water, the anointing with lard, and the re-scrubbing with more soap and hotter water; the burning of their clothes and hats; the lamentations over ruined sheets and pillowcases; the rough-drying with the coarsest of crash towels; of their disgrace during the long day of waiting for their fathers to come home and properly convince them of the heinous nature of their offense; of the nameless methods that these same fathers took to bring their sons to a realizing sense of their unworthiness; of the embargo laid by these tyrannical and unappreciative gentlemen upon enterprise and industry outside the family chores?

Will they ever forget it? *I* never have.

THE END

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